

animadverto

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/30759422) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/30759422>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	방탄소년단 Bangtan Boys BTS
Relationship:	Jeon Jungkook/Park Jimin
Characters:	Park Jimin (BTS) , Jeon Jungkook , Bangtan Boys BTS Ensemble
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics , Alternate Universe - Royalty , Alternate Universe - Fantasy , Smut , Sexual Tension , Slow Burn , Omega Park Jimin (BTS) , Alpha Jeon Jungkook , Park Jimin-centric (BTS) , imagine 18th century europe but also russia , jimin's got silver hair you're welcome , Smutty ending
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-04-18 Words: 40,402 Chapters: 1/1

animadverto

by [anoria_bard](#)

Summary

When the Emperor married the Diamond of the North, he thought he'd got himself a docile little omega who'd keep his mouth shut and look pretty next to him in paintings.

What he got instead is Jimin, the sharpest diamond of all of Northrend, and a constant thorn in his side—winter has no place in the Court of Suns, and never will. So how will the Court ever warm up to Jimin, who seems to be the very embodiment of winter?

A happy Consort makes for a happy Court, everyone knows that. So, in an effort to keep Jimin entertained, the Emperor gifts him a lover. A very skilled one, one the courtiers will gossip about for months to come—and who knows, who might also be able to thaw the Diamond's heart once and for all.

Notes

Dedicated to a little glass of milk; i said i'd gift it to you and i did. thank you for being my friend and sharing in my obsession with [censored] <3

this fic was heavily inspired by the absolutely amazing tv show The Great.

please imagine the interior of the Emperor's palace as a mix between versailles, the royal palace of caserta, and russia's winter palace. enjoy!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

1.

“This raspberry cake is exceptional, is it not, my dear?”

Jimin remains silent. He breaks the icing on the cake with a teaspoon, the silver cutlery digging through the moist interior of the sponge cake with ease. There’s chocolate filling inside, too much of it. It gushes forth like molten lava from the mouth of an active volcano. Jimin dips his teaspoon in it and brings it to his lips.

It burns the tip of his tongue.

“Raspberries grow in the North, yes? You once told me you used to gather berries in the woods around your estate back in Northrend,” the Emperor continues, watching Jimin with expectant eyes.

He doesn’t answer. Taehyung, sitting at the Emperor’s right, pushes the dissected pieces of his slice of cake around the plate, restless.

“What the Emperor means, Your Grace, is that the cake is a gift. For—for you. It’s a gift that, uh—” Taehyung throws a nervous glance at the Emperor, “—he hopes will remind you of your old home.”

“And maybe put a smile on that dreadful face of yours,” the Emperor scoffs, no longer pleased.

At Jimin’s side, Yoongi coughs slightly.

“It is much appreciated, Your Majesty. You’re right, me and Jimin used to brave the woods around the king’s castle to gather berries when we were children. We always came back with our pockets full of mulberries.”

The Emperor scowls. “No raspberries, then?”

Jimin pops one into his mouth and grimaces. “I don’t remember raspberries being this sour in the North.”

“Your Grace *greatly* appreciates the gesture,” Yoongi says quickly, addressing the Emperor. He flashes a warning glance at Jimin. “The cooks here in the Empire are remarkably talented. This cake is simply delicious.”

The Emperor shoves his plate away. “I did not ask for *your* opinion, Min. Shut the fuck up.”

It’s Jimin’s turn to glance at Yoongi. His eyes let him know not to open his mouth again for the rest of the dinner.

But the Emperor exchanges a perfunctory glance with Taehyung and leans over the table, pinning Jimin with his beady black eyes.

“I have something else for you, my dear. Something I hope you’ll find... more to your tastes, in a way. Well, I *am* letting you take your pick, after all—my generosity knows no bounds, as everyone in the Court and beyond knows. Isn’t that true, Taehyung?”

Taehyung jolts. “Yes, Your Majesty. Tales of your generosity have traveled well over the Empire’s borders—”

“Bring them inside!” the Emperor barks to a servant. The butler bows stiffly and disappears behind the double mahogany doors. Jimin stares at the intricately carved wood, his senses sharpening like when he used to join a hunt with his brothers and sisters in the North, and sensed predators hiding in the foliage.

Except he isn’t in the lush forests of Northrend now. His family is miles away, waiting out another deep, terrible winter. And he is here, wrapped up in intricate jewelry and swathed in expensive fabrics, all gifts from a warm country ten times bigger than Northrend.

Marriages of convenience are a strange thing.

He never thought it would happen to him. As his father’s eldest child, he was destined to rule over all of his father’s lands. Frozen lands, harsh lands, difficult lands that he knew like the back of his hand—their smells, their history, their secrets—lands his father would have left him after his death.

That honor befell his younger sibling. When the Emperor of the powerful country your father has been trying to make peace with for decades sets his eyes on *your* portrait instead of the portrait of your pretty omega sister, there’s only one thing to do.

You leave everything behind, and become a gift.

Not just *any* gift.

The Royal Consort to the Emperor of the greatest Empire in the continent.

The double doors open again. The Emperor smiles pleasantly as a row of strong, robust young men step inside, one by one, forming a line against the opposite wall. A dozen of them, more or less, each in the prime of their lives. They can’t be older than thirty, no younger than twenty.

“What is this?” Jimin asks, brows knitting together. Yoongi stiffens at his side. *He knows*. He doesn’t meet his gaze again, even when Jimin nudges him under the table.

The Emperor picks up his chalice and rises to his feet.

“This, my dear Consort, is my real gift to you. I have gathered the finest alphas from all around the region. Each and every one of them has been picked for their extraordinary skills —” he pauses for dramatic effect and looks at Taehyung, who stutters out,

“Lovemaki—”

“Fucking!” The Emperor booms, wine sloshing from the chalice in his hand. “It is for you, my dear, so I won’t have to look at your obnoxiously sour face every time I cross the halls of my palace. Even now, you’re staring daggers at me as if I had kidnapped you and made you Royal Consort against your will!”

He guffaws, but his laughter is met with silence. He glares at Taehyung, who promptly snickers and says, “Very funny, Your Majesty.”

“So!” The Emperor saunters over the young men. “These are the best the Empire has to offer, Your Grace. Of course, their talents are nothing compared to *my* prowess in bed, half the omegas in the Court know that—” he winks at one of the maidservants, who shrinks away in her corner, “—but apparently, the *Diamond of the North* isn’t easily satisfied.”

He says the words with contempt, making a mockery of the nickname Jimin’s been assigned the very first day he stepped into this foreign Court.

Jimin sits back in his chair, cake forgotten in front of him. Winds of now lost winters sweep over his heart. *This* is the only kind of winter he’ll ever experience, secluded in the Court of a country that doesn’t know the colder seasons—only long summers and timid springs.

“So tonight, I gift you pleasure, my dear Diamond. Pick the one that most tickles your fancy and I’ll elevate him to official lover of the Consort. He will live in the rooms adjacent to your apartments, and will be there for the taking all day, all night.”

He walks past a couple of them, stopping right in front of one of the younger boys. Smirking, he grabs the boy’s crotch and squeezes. “These are young, *fresh*. Alphas in their prime, smelling of sandalwood and brine. Maybe their scents will finally manage to cover the ever-souring smell of your *dreariness*, my darling.”

The Emperor turns his nose, as if smelling something rotten. It is no secret around the Court that the Emperor doesn’t like his Royal Consort’s scent—the fact that it seems to spoil whenever the Emperor is around is never on anyone’s lips, though. For how could the scent of peaches overripe to such an extent that the Emperor refuses to lie with the omega he’s claimed as his own?

The Court sees all, Yoongi had once said to him, merely a couple weeks after his wedding to the Emperor. *They see and they smell your dissatisfaction. You can’t rule over an Empire if you hate its people.*

I don’t hate them, he had answered. It was the truth. He liked the people well enough—most of them were sunny, easy-going, cheerful people with open hearts and contagious laughter. Not the Emperor, though.

They need to know you’re happy, Yoongi had insisted. *If you’re happy, the Emperor is happy. The Court is happy. The people are happy.*

The word *happy* had lost all meaning after the third time Yoongi had said it.

“You want me to be... happy?” Jimin asks his husband, voice cold. “And you think taking a lover will help my standing with the Court?”

“A Consort who gets fucked five days to Sunday every night is a relaxed Consort, a mellow Consort, a Consort who doesn’t fucking mope around all day, spoiling the mood of the Court with his death glares,” the Emperor scoffs, rolling his eyes. “I swear to God, darling, *snowdrops* bloom after you walk the hallways. They might be pretty little things, but there’s no space for winter flowers in the Court of Suns. This is the Empire. It’s always sunny in the Empire. So, smile like the sun. Sunflowers are more beautiful than snowdrops, don’t you think? Tall, dignified flowers. Be a sunflower, my dear—that’s an order.”

He sits back in his chair at the head of the table. Taehyung hastily hides behind a goblet, rushing to finish his wine. Some spills down his chin, staining his collar. Jimin looks at Yoongi. He’s still not meeting his eyes.

Another person who wants him to be happy. He figures he can’t blame him—Yoongi’s reputation is directly linked to Jimin’s, since he’s the only other person from Northrend at Court. His only *friend* at Court.

Who wants him to be happy.

He glances at the alphas. They’re all tall, dark, and strong. Common characteristics in alphas, but there’s *something* to them. The slightly longer hair, no beards. Sharp cheekbones.

He’s chosen them well.

“Your Majesty.” Jimin grips the armrests with both hands, back straight as a rod. “You know me so well. I’m surprised.”

Yoongi’s whole body tenses. He’ll deal with him later.

The Emperor gives him a gracious smile. “Of course I do, my dear. You’re my spouse, I know your heart. Now choose,” he splays his arms wide. “Or perhaps you want to see the merchandise first?”

“There’s no need—”

“A most intelligent thought. Let’s see it, then,” the Emperor barks at the young man closest to him, the first of the row. “Lower your breeches for the Consort.”

“I won’t take a *lover*, Your Majesty.”

His voice is drowned by the Emperor’s roaring laughter at the alpha’s eagerness to please him. Jimin thinks he sees more than one drop of terror in his expression.

Jimin averts his gaze. One by one, the men step up and push their pants down at the Emperor’s behest, and every time the Emperor finds something to mock them with.

Jimin wants to scream. Instead, he digs his fingernails into the stuffing of the armrests, tearing at the fabric. He wishes he could be anywhere but here. That time he fell into a

hunter's boar trap and broke his leg in the woods around his father's castle—and had to wait *hours* for his siblings to catch up to him, *that* was an experience more pleasant than listening to the Emperor making a mockery out of these alphas and their chances of pleasing his *frigid* Consort.

“The Consort's got a heart of snow and an asshole of ice,” he hears the Emperor say through the padding in his ears. “You think you can melt it with that puny little thing? Are you an alpha or an omega in disguise?”

More laughter, this time followed by Taehyung's forced chuckles. Jimin glares at the lackey, mind going numb. The half-naked men are only a stain of color in his periphery.

I am the Royal Consort. He can't mock me like this.

But nobody cares enough to put a stop to the mockery.

“This one looks pretty good. A solid alpha cock. What do you say, my dear?”

Jimin presses his lips into a thin line. He keeps looking ahead, still as a statue. The icing on the immense raspberry cake at the center of the table is starting to melt at the edges.

He hears more japes, more jabs at the men's virility. Taehyung has joined in the fun, pointing and slapping his thigh every time the Emperor makes another one of his jokes. Yoongi sits by Jimin's side, eyes fixed on his half-empty plate. He's red in the face. Ashamed. Or perhaps angry, like him. No way to tell for sure.

He counts ten men in his head. Ten stammered “*Your Majesty*”, ten nervous chuckles pushed out through clenched teeth by ten men left with no choice but ridicule themselves in front of their sovereign. When they get to the last alpha in the line, Jimin can see from the look in his eyes that the Emperor is growing bored of this game.

“Last one, finally. Step up, breeches around your knees. Chop-chop, we don't have all night.”

He feels the last alpha shuffle closer, sees him shift in the corner of his eye. The alpha is standing directly on his left, but he doesn't turn his head to look. He keeps his head high and his eyes trained on the dishes ahead of him.

The last alpha in the room, and then this torture is over. And he can go back to his apartments and scream into his pillows.

An audible gasp slips past Taehyung's lips, and the Emperor slams a hand against the table. The silver cutlery rattles against the wood.

“*Hah!* That's what I call a *true* alpha cock.”

His voice booms in the vaulted chamber, followed by another one of his bellowing laughs. The Emperor nods, pleased with himself. “Plump and dignified, even when soft! It deserves an applause, doesn't it, Taehyung?”

Taehyung stands up and begins to clap with exaggerated enthusiasm.

“Well?” the Emperor looks around the room, to servants and commensals alike. “All of you, clap!”

Yoongi starts applauding timidly. He hides his hands under the table after the fifth or sixth clap. Jimin looks in astonishment as every single maid and butler joins in, their faces mirthless, cold as stone.

They’re used to this.

Him too, he should have gotten accustomed to the Emperor’s mercurial nature—he’s been living at Court for half a year already.

And yet, the Emperor always manages to surprise him.

Sighing, he takes a sip from his goblet. The wine tastes better here in the South—sweeter, richer. It takes more than just a few glasses to get drunk. Right now, he wishes he’d brought the stronger stuff they make at home with him instead of Min Yoongi, who now sits uselessly at his side, too afraid to raise his gaze.

“Isn’t it a marvelous cock, Your Grace?”

Jimin looks at the Emperor.

“I wouldn’t know. Is it to your taste, Your Majesty?”

The Emperor’s face dusts in pink. He doesn’t like the slight insinuation in Jimin’s words. An alpha Emperor only fucks his omegas. Which is to say, every omega in his reign is game.

And the occasional sweet-smelling beta.

“You haven’t *looked*,” the Emperor says, sharp. “What are those pretty eyes of yours for, if not to look at your husband’s gifts?”

“Why, to gaze at you, husband,” Jimin says sweetly. “You’re the greatest gift I could ask for.”

You and your whole country.

He buries the thought in the deepest recesses of his mind. He’s little more than a glorified concubine in this state, he’s aware. He has no real power over the Empire, just an empty claim. Not as long as the Emperor, his husband, sits on the throne.

“And yet you’re as cold as a dead fish when I fuck you,” the Emperor snaps. “The whole Court can smell your disdain. I will not tolerate it any further. Omegas are born to be fucked, and so you shall be—thoroughly, until your sickening smell ceases to fester the halls.”

The Emperor walks up to where Jimin’s sitting. He’s no longer smiling, no longer laughing.

Jimin doesn’t turn to look at his husband. His vision tunnels, everything except for the silly raspberry cake ahead of him becomes a blur. The smell of burnt wood is intense in his nostrils. He can almost taste the ashes in his mouth.

The Emperor has always smelled like a burned forest for him, and perhaps that was the one thing that upset him the most—since the day they met.

“Look at it,” the Emperor growls.

Jimin picks up a raspberry from his plate. He turns it around, staring at it like it’s the most interesting thing he’s seen in a while.

“These raspberries are days old. They’ve got mold on them.”

The grumbling turns deeper. “I said look at it. It’s an order.”

Jimin finally snaps his head up to glare at his husband. “I don’t need a lover.”

It happens quicker than he expected. The Emperor is many things—uncouth and dumb being two of his most prominent features—but slow, he is not. He grabs Jimin’s chin with a vise-like grip and turns his head to the left forcefully.

“Close your eyes and I’ll gouge your eyeballs out.”

Jimin holds his breath, a bolt of horror spiking through his body. He tames it down, gulps, and grits his teeth.

“I am the Royal Consort. Take your hands off me.”

The Emperor’s hold turns bruising.

“You’re my property, little diamond. Now choose which cock you want to ride tonight.”

He yanks Jimin’s head toward the last alpha, forcing him to look.

So Jimin does. He meets the alpha’s gaze by accident—he didn’t mean to look in his eyes, didn’t mean to look any of those alphas in the eyes.

This one’s pupils aren’t blown out by fear, much to his surprise. His eyes are big and open wide, as if slightly startled by the night’s events. It is not common for the people in the palace to see their Emperor manhandle the Consort, after all. Jimin can’t blame him. Although he does find curious the fact that this alpha isn’t cowering in fear or looking away out of respect, like the others are—no, he’s staring right into Jimin’s eyes.

Unafraid.

“See how big he is? Every noble in the palace will hear your screams of pleasure tonight, Your Grace.”

Jimin’s gaze involuntarily slides down for a fraction of a second. His eyes widen imperceptibly, and he wrenches free from his husband’s hold, shoving his hands away.

Blood rushes to his face. “Get dressed,” he orders to the alphas without really seeing them. The smell of pheromones is strong and ripe in the dining room, clogging his nostrils. He

needs air.

“This one then,” the Emperor says, grinning. “I know you like them big. If anything, it’ll remind you of your sweet husband.” He flicks his chin playfully. Jimin feels like throwing up, but he regains his composure quickly—it’s his second nature. Poise. Control. Annoying the Emperor with his indifference.

He figures he could annoy him by throwing up on his shoes, but it’s not exactly his style.

He addresses the guards with all the authority he can muster. “Guards, send these alphas back where they came from.”

The Emperor just smiles. “Do as the Consort says,” he snickers. “Except for this one. The Consort’s lover.”

“I will send him back like the others,” Jimin growls.

“Try it and see what happens, my dear. I’m serious.”

He feels a hand covering his on the table. Yoongi’s.

“Your Grace, I beg you to accept the Emperor’s gift. He has your best interest at heart, I’m sure.”

You just want me to win over the Court.

How is taking a lover going to do that? Does Yoongi seriously think the retelling of this alpha’s sexual exploits will make the courtiers magically like him?

“I am going to bed.”

He gets up and gathers his ridiculously long robes—lined in silver and pale gray to mimic the color of Jimin’s hair, another original gift from the Emperor—and storms away, followed by an agitated Min Yoongi and his personal manservant.

“I don’t know what game you’re playing, Yoongi, but you’re *severely* wrong if you think you can get away with teaming up with the Emperor behind my back.”

“Your Grace, I didn’t team up with anyone—”

“I order you to shut the fuck up,” Jimin growls, flashing his eyes at Yoongi.

His friend halts. “I apologize, Your Grace.”

“And stop calling me Your Grace!”

He rushes to his apartments, leaving his stunned friend behind. He can just imagine the appalled look in Yoongi’s face—his mouth agape, his eyes wide. The same expression that must be mirrored in every servant’s face, those who have seen him lose his temper. The cold Diamond of the North, unfazed by anything and anyone, enraged at both his Emperor and his

best friend. He thinks he can already hear the whispers that will sweep the palace in the morning.

The Consort, he snapped back. Guess even diamonds can break.

I'm told he threw a fit because he didn't like what the Emperor generously gifted him.

What a little bitch.

He slams the doors of his bedchamber at his back and tries to leave all his thoughts behind. He exhales slowly, letting out a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding all the way to his apartment. It's like his lungs fold in half, and when he inhales again, it hurts.

He's never felt so disrespected before.

He misses home.

2.

He watches his manservant quietly removing the jewels from his ears and around his neck with attentiveness, as if by looking hard enough he could find out if he, like Yoongi, was in on the Emperor's scheme from the start. What he finds is just a tired servant whose mind is already a thousand miles away—probably thinking of having a hot drink before going to bed in the servant's quarters—and whose hands work fast, expertly unclasping necklaces and putting them back in their cases.

"What do you think of the Emperor's gift for me, Ken?"

Ken startles. He meets his eyes in the mirror and answers,

"A thoughtful gift, Your Grace. The Emperor must know how much Your Grace misses his homeland."

"I wasn't talking about the *cake*, Ken."

"Oh." He sees Ken gulp nervously. The servant tucks a strand of Jimin's silver hair behind his ear, but his fingers fumble in taking out the earring. "Th-that was another fine gift, Your Grace. The Emperor must have thought of your loneliness in the palace."

"I am not lonely," Jimin says, more to himself than to his servant. "I'm just not as exuberant as the rest of the Court."

"Of course, Your Grace."

Ken bows his head and finishes removing the jewelry. Jimin rises to his feet without another word, arms spread wide to let Ken unravel his ridiculous Empire robes from his body.

If there is one thing he hates about his new home, it's omega fashion. The Empire wraps its highborn omegas in swathes upon swathes of precious fabric, which envelop the torso and then cascade around the legs with all the heaviness of window drapes. Jimin had worn *armor* that felt lighter than these robes. But such is the custom of the Empire, and Empire alphas liked to gaze at the flocks of omegas timidly shuffling about the palace in their colorful, heavy, expensive robes.

It's easier to chase omegas and trap them in an empty room if they physically can't run. Easier to lift their robes and take them.

The first day Jimin set foot in his royal apartments in the palace, he tore the seams of every set of clothing in his armoire—much to Ken's politely hidden displeasure. From the outside, nobody could see the mess he'd made of the beautiful robes the Emperor had gifted his Consort, although many at Court did marvel at Jimin's unusual nimbleness around the palace. He still tried to pace himself and not break into a run every time he spotted the Emperor on the other side of a hallway, of course, but it did make breathing a little easier around his husband and his functionaries—the knowledge that if he wanted to, he could run. That is, if he doesn't trip on his ridiculously long robes.

The thought of tumbling down the stairs of the palace's enormous foyer – hard, marble stairs that stretch on and on and are frankly, a hassle to climb up – makes him internally cringe. An unbecoming death for a member of the royal family, for sure, but it would depend on what he would be trying to escape from. If it's another dreary session of *lovemaking* with his dear husband, then he thinks it might be worth it.

A knock at the doors pulls him back to his bedchamber. He turns toward the noise and sees the head of a butler pop between the huge set of doors.

"My apologies, Your Grace. There is a visitor here for you."

"I didn't send for anyone at this hour."

"It's on the Emperor's orders, Your Grace."

Jimin's eyes narrow imperceptibly. At his back, Ken stops removing his robes.

"Very well, then. Send them in."

He's not surprised when the alpha his husband designated as his *official lover* steps inside his bedchamber, head bowed and eyes respectfully cast downward. The doors close with a muffled *thump*.

Jimin holds back a sigh.

"Shall I continue with the undressing, Your Grace?"

Jimin throws Ken a withering glare. "You're dismissed."

"But, Your Grace—"

"I'll call you when I'm ready to go to bed."

Ken bows and scurries out of the chamber, throwing a worried glance the alpha's way. Neither of them speak.

Jimin sits back at his vanity table. He lets out the sigh he kept lodged in his lungs.

"What is your name, alpha?"

"Jeon Jeongguk, Your Grace."

Jimin raises his eyes to the mirror in time to see Jeongguk straighten back up from his bow and fix him with a level gaze.

"Jeon Jeongguk. It's very late. What brings you to my apartments?"

"I'm here on the Emperor's orders, Your Grace. It is an honor to be chosen as the official lover to the Royal Consort."

Another bow, this time deeper than the first. Jimin finally turns in his chair to properly look at the alpha.

“I haven’t chosen you as my lover. You do realize I have no need for your services, yes?”

Jeongguk seems to pick his words carefully. “I know, Your Grace. But an order is an order, and I am the Emperor’s subject.”

The common phrasing is *I am the Emperor’s loyal subject*, and Jimin doesn’t miss the way Jeongguk omits the word. He throws him a perfunctory look, sizing up the alpha in front of him before standing up and walking to the doors that lead to his receiving room.

He pushes the doors open and turns to Jeongguk.

“You may go.”

Jeongguk seems to hold back a sigh of his own.

“Your Grace, I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation.” Jeongguk takes one single step forward. “I was personally selected by the Emperor to satisfy your needs. As newly appointed lover of the Consort, I am to reside in your apartments.”

Jimin doesn’t deign him of a response. He walks across the receiving room and slams another set of doors open, revealing the low-lit hallway outside.

“Guards. Take this alpha away.”

The guard exchange a look. Someone to the left clears his voice. From a darkened corner of the receiving room, the butler steps up and smiles tightly.

“What are you doing still here?” Jimin asks, frowning. Was he waiting to hear them fucking in the bedroom, and report to the Emperor?

“My lord Consort, it is custom that the official lover to the Royal Consort reside in the rooms adjacent the Consort’s personal chambers. It is the Emperor’s—”

“—*orders*, yes, I suspected as much,” Jimin says. His gaze sharpens into a glare. “You may go. Your duties are over for the day.”

The butler bows and vanishes in the shadows like a wisp of smoke. Jimin shudders. He wonders how many times he stayed back to listen in on his and Yoongi’s nightly conversations.

Jimin shuts the doors and goes back to the bedchamber where Jeongguk is still waiting for him, looking around the room with mild interest.

“Your apartments are lovely, Your Grace. There is much of the North in here.”

Jimin ignores the alpha’s weak attempt at softening him. He stops right in front of the man, and realizes the alpha is slightly taller than him. Not surprising for an alpha, but the detail

vexes him nonetheless.

“Very well. Let’s start over. Good evening, sir Jeongguk, and welcome to the Court of Suns.”

He extends a hand for the alpha to shake, as it is custom in his homeland—Northrend. The slight confusion that crosses Jeongguk’s face sends a jolt of gratification down Jimin’s spine. He’d always liked confusing Empire citizens with his Northerner ways.

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Your Grace.”

To Jimin’s surprise, Jeongguk takes the hand he’s being offered and shakes it—it’s a moderately firm handshake, not too assertive and not too submissive, considering he’s shaking hands with royalty. It shows Jimin that he’s somehow privy to the ways of Jimin’s people.

But there’s also other things one could learn of a person from a handshake.

Jimin pulls Jeongguk’s hand closer and swiftly turns it around. He felt them as soon as their hands touched, and now he sees them: calluses, hard and easily distinguishable, between the thumb and index fingers and on his palm.

“I’m afraid my hands are rougher than the Emperor’s, Your Grace.”

Jeongguk’s hand slips from his grasp, balling into a loose fist at his side.

“Interesting calluses.”

Jeongguk smiles timidly. His eyes are very big and nicely shaped, the irises a warm chestnut brown.

“Life on a farm can do that to you, Your Grace,” Jeongguk says, still smiling. He seems to hesitate for all but two seconds before adding, “You have them too. Omega hands are usually softer in the South.”

His tone of voice isn’t inquisitive nor demeaning. A simple statement of facts. Jimin can appreciate a perceptive mind.

“Do you know anything about Northern customs, Jeongguk?”

He sits back at the vanity table and starts removing his shoes, starting with unraveling the laces that go all the way up to his calves. He sees the alpha’s gaze sweep over his bare leg but for a moment, before settling back up on his face.

“I’m afraid not, Your Grace.”

Really?

“In Northrend, omegas aren’t treated like precious gemstones to be encased in a display cabinet and admired from a distance. They fight in wars alongside alphas, because they’re quicker and more nimble than your average alpha soldier. That is why the Empire has lost so

many battles against my family.” Jimin smiles. “You only use alphas. You rely on brute strength. War isn’t only about strength—something the alpha generals around the Emperor’s war table seem to forget often.”

“But now you’re here to remind them,” Jeongguk says.

Jimin huffs, tossing the shoes to the side. “They rarely listen to my advice. I am just the Royal Consort, a pretty foreign omega standing at the side of their fierce Emperor. I have no voice.”

“Would you like to have one?”

Jeongguk’s voice is soft, but his eyes tell another story. *Perhaps it’s just the way farmers look at their lieges here*, Jimin thinks.

“You don’t have one either,” Jimin says. “You’re just a farmer. Aren’t you?”

“I’m used to have my voice drowned out by everyone else.”

“Well then,” Jimin gets up and claps his hands once. “I guess I shall get used to have mine drowned out by dumb alphas.”

When Ken reemerges from the receiving room to attend him again, he turns his back to Jeongguk and waits to hear his footsteps receding. Only when he hears the doors close does he exhale slowly, pushing out the events of the evening like they were poisonous gas in his lungs.

3.

“Your Grace, the Emperor wants to know why you aren’t having breakfast with him this morning. And if you enjoyed his gift last night,” Ken says to him, a blush setting on the young servant’s cheeks.

“The Emperor demands to know a lot of things this morning,” Jimin retorts.

“What shall I report back?”

“For God’s sake, Ken, this isn’t a *report*. You’re not a soldier, and my chambers aren’t the war front,” Jimin says, rolling his eyes. “Tell him that I’m not feeling well, and that I’ll stay in my chambers for the remainder of the day. Just the thought of seeing him at all today makes my stomach churn.”

Ken’s stuttering response is interrupted by a knock at the door. Jimin sets his cup of tea down on the coffee table and sighs deeply when the familiar head of a dark-haired alpha pops out in-between the doors.

“Your Grace, Emperor Jihan has requested our presence at the—”

“*Our* presence?”

He doesn’t like how Jeongguk stressed *requested*—means that it’s a direct order from the Emperor, and that he’s in one of those moods when he doesn’t like to be refused.

Jeongguk opens the doors a little wider. He’s dressed in simple court clothes which are still remarkably more expensive and well-fitting than the baggy shirt and pants he was wearing yesterday. They suit him well, and Jimin wonders if those are also part of the Emperor’s intricate scheme to make the alpha more appealing to his eyes. Or maybe it’s just the proper way of clothing the Royal Consort’s official lover—dark silks to bring out the deep brown of his eyes, and tight pants to catch the attention of half the omega courtiers in the palace.

“Very well. I’ll be just a minute.”

“I’ll wait for you in the receiving room, Your Grace.”

Jeongguk closes the doors. Jimin looks at Ken. “Do you think he’ll grow bored of waiting for me to dress up? It does take way longer than a minute.”

“Your Grace, he’s your loyal servant. He’ll wait for as long as it takes.”

He’ll wait for as long as it takes.

He hums, lost in thought. “Wait for what, exactly?”

Ken frowns. “For you to dress, my lord.”

He sighs. “I wonder if that’s right.”

They walk down the hallways in silence, Jimin spear-heading the small group of attendants escorting him to the other side of the palace where he’s to meet the Emperor for breakfast. Jeongguk and Ken follow at a close distance. This morning, something in the air smells fresher, even though the windows are all closed and the sky is downcast. Perhaps it’s the smell of upcoming rain. No, it’s earthier.

“Consort! You slept well, I hope?” the Emperor says as soon as Jimin steps in the luminous breakfast hall. His husband is waiting for him seated at one head of the table, already half-way through his breakfast. “Are you feeling rested? Relaxed? How fares your royal backside?”

He erupts into roaring laughter. Taehyung, ever his loyal sidekick, giggles automatically.

Jimin sits on the other side of the long table. Jeongguk takes the seat on his left, eyeing the food in front of him with something akin to awe.

“Husband.”

“*Consort*,” the Emperor grins. “In honor of you having fun with our strapping alpha here—” he nods to Jeongguk—“I visited the royal concubine again last night. I must say, she is an extraordinary lover, that one. Without her, I would have thought every omega in Northrend frigid as a lake in the winter. Yet she seems pleased with my numerous efforts to get her pregnant. You, my dear,” he points to Jimin with his knife, “made a great choice picking her. Anyone else and I would have been bored to hell and back.”

“It is her duty to give us an heir,” Jimin says simply. “It is also her duty to please her Emperor any way she can.”

Jimin highly doubted she enjoyed being mounted by the likes of his husband, but at least he wasn’t the one who was going to bear his children.

I’ll just have to raise them as my own.

Erin is the name of the female omega Jimin’s father had chosen to bear his and the Emperor’s children. She’s pretty, meek, and most importantly, the doctors deemed her very, very fertile. All attributes that made her perfect in the eyes of his husband.

She’s part of Jimin’s small entourage in the palace. Her, and Min Yoongi, and—well, that is it. There’s himself, too. Three Northerners in a Court of suns and sempiternal summer breezes.

“And did our extremely well-endowed alpha fulfill his duty, my dear?” the Emperor inquires, pleased.

“He didn’t. And he won’t.”

He glimpses Jeongguk throwing him a worried glance from the corner of his eye.

“My dear. I don’t see a smile on your beautiful face. I thought I was clear with my orders.” The Emperor turns to Jeongguk again, unsmiling. “Please the Consort until he *smiles* again.”

“My liege—”

“I gave him orders too, and he followed them well,” Jimin says, sharp. “I have no need for a lover. The Court will have to do without my smiles this season.”

“This season?” the Emperor repeats. “And what about next season? And the season after that? They don’t want a slab of ice as Royal Consort, they want a *person*. Someone who doesn’t look down on them and laughs charmingly at his Emperor’s extremely funny jokes.”

“I don’t *look down* on them,” Jimin rebukes, though he doesn’t remark on the Emperor’s sense of humor.

“You spend your days with your nose buried in those silly books you brought all the way from the North, and I was told you haven’t discussed the latest fashions with the omegas of the Court—they don’t know what to *wear* this season, and they’re going *crazy*. I’m not sure why exactly they care so much about which hats to wear at which parties—I don’t follow such omega trivialities—but *you* should. It’s *your* job. *I* rule the Empire, and *you* make the Court happy.”

Jimin nibbles at a biscuit. It’s baked perfectly, the surface golden and crumbly. It tastes like sand in his mouth.

“And how should I do that, husband?”

“That’s your business. You’re an omega, if you don’t know these things, who does?”

Taehyung snorts his agreement as the Emperor continues his tirade.

“Isn’t entertaining an innate quality of omegas? And *you*, you’re the Consort. You should, I don’t know, radiate light and warmth upon entering a room. Isn’t that what you’ve been taught to do in the North?”

I was taught to rule and govern over a harsh land, Jimin thinks begrudgingly. Not to gossip with the omegas of your Court.

“Yes, of course,” he mutters. “I had classes on how to radiate light and warmth every morning at eleven.”

“Did you say something?”

“Never mind, my liege,” Jimin says pleasantly, crossing his legs under the table. It’s something he shouldn’t be able to do in his robes, but nobody ever dares to bring it up. He knows Jeongguk has noticed, too, when the alpha flashes him a curious glance.

“I know you’re a tough nut to break, being from the North and all. I’m not saying you’re a *barbarian*, but I know there’s a lot of *ice* to *melt* before reaching your heart, my dear.” The Emperor drums his fingers on the table, looking at him with eyebrows knitted into a frown. His gaze slides to Jeongguk. “Alpha. I trust you’ll manage to thaw him soon. Winter never lasts long in the South anyway.”

And with those last words he gets up, signals for Taehyung to follow him, and exits the room.

Jimin sits back and sighs for what seems to him like the hundredth time since last night. He glances at Ken, standing straight as a broomstick at his side.

“Is the Court that displeased with me?”

“Your Grace.” Ken dips into a low bow. “The nobles talk. They say that you’re, uhm. Cruel and cold and with a heart of stone, Your Grace. They see your aloofness as hostility, Your Grace.”

“*Cruel?* Crueler than the *Emperor?*”

He can’t wrap his head around that one. Cold and made of stone, he can understand—it’s something in the way he’s been carrying himself since he was a child. *You got it from your Lady mother*, his father would tell him affectionately. Except everyone in the castle loved his lady mother, but *he’s* not in the castle. He’s in a palace where privacy and solitude are considered mortal sins.

“They haven’t seen you laugh *once*, Your Grace.”

“You haven’t seen me laugh either,” Jimin says, miffed. “Do you think I am cruel, Ken?”

“No, Your Grace. Just very private, Your Grace.”

“If I may—” Jeongguk speaks up, leaning forward. “I think it’s wise to worry about the Court’s opinion. A good ruler should keep the nobility happy *and* at bay, Your Grace. You are a key element to that.”

Jimin surveys him with a frown. “You seem to know an awful lot about life in the palace, for a farmer.”

Jeongguk just smiles. “I’m a quick learner, Your Grace. The chambers of the palace are luminous and spacious, voices carry easily. And I have big eyes, and big ears.”

Jimin *wants* to make an uncouth joke because the alpha has simply left the right opening for it, but he bites his tongue.

“You think that rumors about me taking a lover will suddenly make me more palatable to the courtiers?”

“No, but I think it would make you look more human. More like them. The South, especially the Empire, my lord, is a land with no shadows. The sun always shines on its subjects, and on every corner of the Empire. The same goes for life at Court. There are no shadows in the

corners of this palace, Your Grace. Everything is exposed, every twitch on a noble's face, every torrid affair."

Jeongguk stops to take a sip of wine from Jimin's goblet. His voice has turned a shade deeper. "Last night, as I was being escorted inside the palace, I spotted *two* different couples fornicating in the hallways. Nobody seemed to care, and nobody stopped them. I'm sure you've already noticed it's a habit of the Court, yes? Copulating in public. They don't care to hide, because there's simply nowhere to hide. Nothing should remain hidden in the Court of Suns."

Jimin stares, unperturbed, at the alpha taking another sip from his goblet.

"I *have* noticed that," he admits reluctantly. "It's a rather... peculiar pastime of the Court."

Jeongguk grins, and it's like a veil lifts from his eyes.

"I've heard tales of the Court's debauchery in the village. It's strange to see it with my own eyes."

"Eager to be a participant?"

Jeongguk chuckles. "Only at your request, Your Grace."

Jimin scoffs. "In the North, we don't engage in sexual acts out in the open."

"As you wish, Your Grace. We shall keep it to your bedchamber."

"No. We shall keep it in the Emperor's imagination," Jimin says sternly. "You will return to your village at once. I hope you enjoyed your first royal breakfast, because it's also your last."

Instead of stiffening, Jeongguk's posture relaxes visibly. He leans back on his chair, crossing one leg over the other.

"I can't go back. Emperor's orders."

"I have issued *new* orders."

Ken interrupts them with a timid voice. "The Emperor's orders overrule the Royal Consort's, Your Grace."

He wants to growl in frustration, but he keeps himself in check. There's so many things he would like to *do* and *say* and *shout*, and they're all pushing and prodding at his skin from the inside, begging to be let out. Maybe he should let go a bit, show the servants and the people at Court he *is* capable of emotions—*violent* ones.

"You will not touch a single hair on me."

"Your hair is really pretty, Your Grace. Is silver an unusual color in the North as well?"

Jeongguk's sudden insolence irks him. Sitting there in his new Court clothes, popping berries in his mouth one after the other, his gaze level and direct—such impudence. Just another alpha who thinks he can win him over simply because of their different biology, with complete disregard of their respective social ranks.

“My family all have silver hair. It's not uncommon in the North.”

“Well, it is here,” Jeongguk says pleasantly. “I've always thought blond hair to be particularly eye-catching, but now I know there's an even lovelier color.”

“Your flattery will take you nowhere.”

“I was just expressing my thoughts, Your Grace.”

“Keep them to yourself,” Jimin snaps, getting up. He fixes Jeongguk with cold eyes. “You can stay at Court for the time being. Keep to your rooms, but never, ever use the door that leads to my apartment. Are we clear? It must be kept closed at all times. I want to see you in my chambers *only* if I summon you.”

Jeongguk looks up at him with a small smile. There's the tiniest of moles underneath his plush bottom lip, and Jimin's gaze strays there for a second before cutting back up to his brown eyes.

“The Emperor will tire of your presence soon enough. And then you shall go home to tend to your farm.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

His eyes fall to Jeongguk's hand on the table. He frowns slightly, remembering how callused it felt the other night. He closes his own hand in a fist, feeling the exact same calluses on his hand, only less pronounced after months of not wielding a sword.

“You're dismissed. Do with your day as you see fit. Don't bother following me around.”

4.

“How are things with your new lover, Jimin?”

Jimin sits up straighter when the room fills with nobles and servants carrying trays of food and tea. He agreed to host a gathering in the royal wing’s sitting room, inviting all the nobles currently residing inside the palace—the Emperor’s inner circle, so to speak. *His*, not Jimin’s. That much is abundantly clear. As much as some of them seemed to loathe the Emperor and his fickleness and cruelty—though the masks they wear around his husband hide every trace of dissatisfaction—he knows they see him as a foreigner, a weird one at that. Material for hot gossip, no matter that Jimin is above them all in rank.

“Don’t call him that. He’s not my lover until he makes *love* to me.” He picks up a plum and glares at it as if it were the source of all his problems. “And even if I agreed to let him fuck me, I wouldn’t call *that* love.”

“It’s just a position, Your Grace. The Empire has the royal concubine—”

“And an endless line of whores and courtiers to pick from.”

“—and the Consort has the official lover in the Court.”

“But he’s not *from* the Court. He’s a...” He frowns. “A farmer’s son.”

“Well, no noble seemed to pique your interest.”

“So the Emperor gifts me a peasant,” Jimin says bitterly. “He wants the Royal Consort to be fucked by a *peasant*. Have you checked him for pox marks?”

“He’s in perfect health, Your Grace. Rumor has it he’s got great stamina as well.”

“I don’t want to know the details, thank you very much,” Jimin scoffs, annoyed at the slow grin he sees spreading on his friend’s lips. “You knew about this. You *consulted* with the Emperor.”

“He asked me about your taste in men, yes. I had to oblige. He’s my Emperor now.”

“And you’re *my* friend.”

“I know you won’t do anything you don’t want to, Jimin. You can fend for yourself in this court of...” Yoongi glances at the farthest corner of the hall, where an alpha of the court is pinning a giggling omega against the wall, hands roaming everywhere. “... *beasts*.”

Jimin snorts. Nobody has yet dared to approach him and Yoongi – the two foreigners from the North, so different and so cold with their lighter hair and lighter eyes. The courtiers enter the room, meet the Consort’s gaze, and bow graciously before joining the rest of the nobility—away from the scrutinizing gaze of their Consort. For Jimin, this is more than enough socializing. For the Emperor, it’s not even the barest minimum.

“I take it you haven’t partaken in the Court’s favorite pastime yet?” he asks Yoongi.

“You mean fucking someone against one of the display cases in the main hall? No, not yet, my lord.” Yoongi’s gaze shifts back to him. “Although it is highly expected of *you* these days, I’ve heard.”

“I like to keep them waiting.”

“Everyone is curious to see your young stallion in action. They’ve only heard tales of his... sizable virility.”

“Those shall be enough.”

“They’re not,” Yoongi says with a stern look. “You have to give them crumbs at least, if not the whole loaf.”

“Crumbs?” Jimin sweeps the chamber with his gaze, taking in every noble in the room. The laughter, the music, the omegas whispering behind their fans. “They expect the whole *bakery* from me.”

“Just make something up. Say that you’ve tried him out, and that you’re content. Then, the next day, add some spice.”

“Why are you so dead-set on this?”

“I want you to live a happy life, Jimin.”

“I can live a happy life without fucking a farmer, Yoongi.”

“The Court won’t see you as one of them until you *behave* like one of them. Like a true citizen of the Empire, and a member of the Court.”

“I’m not *a* member of the Court. I am the Royal Consort, and *they* are my Court,” Jimin says, bristling at Yoongi’s tone.

“Trivialities. You know what to do to gain their approval.”

He slumps in the velvet armchair. He casts his gaze over the entire room—the vaulted ceiling, so high and intricately painted with scenes taken from tales and legends of the Empire’s foundation. The tall, wide windows, the light of a fierce sun streaming through, reflecting off the marble floors. The elegant columns lining the walls, the paintings alternating bucolic scenes with the stern expressions of famous generals and members of the royal family. The Court, dancing and singing and drinking and flirting. He glimpses a boy of barely eighteen being led away through one of the not-so-secret passageways by an alpha twice his age.

“This isn’t the future I had imagined for myself.”

“Because this wasn’t the future that was promised to you, Jimin,” Yoongi says softly. “But you have to make the most of it. I know you know how to. You’re smart, Jimin. You’ll figure

it out.” Yoongi looks at the nobles with quiet sadness. “And they’ll love you one day. All of them.”

“I just have to *smile*.”

“That would be a great start.”

“Your Grace!”

One of the male omegas detaches from the flock and saunters forward, fingers wrapped around a champagne flute. Jimin doesn’t recall his name, but remembers seeing him dallying around the stables quite often—drooling after the stable boy’s alpha scent.

“We can’t thank you enough for this invitation. It is a lovely party you’ve hosted for us.”

Jimin glances beyond the omega. His entourage stares back from behind glasses and fans, whispering among each other and giggling.

“It’s a Consort’s duty to host parties, is it not?”

The other omega smiles. “Quite. Forgive my forwardness, Your Grace, but I hear you’ve taken on a lover.”

He perches on the edge of the couch, next to a very stiff Yoongi. His friend has never liked excessively sweet-smelling omegas, and this one smells incredibly sugary.

“I… have,” Jimin concedes. No use trying to deny the Emperor’s word.

“Splendid! We were wondering how long it would take for you to pick one,” the omega giggles. “Although, we didn’t know your tastes were so… how should I say? Ah, *rustic*.”

“Every other alpha in the palace was spoken for,” Jimin deadpans.

The omega laughs a little too loudly.

“You’re so funny, Your Grace. I didn’t know Northerners knew how to jest.” His eyes glimmer. “So, we’re all dying to know, Your Grace,” he casts a quick glance over his shoulder at his friends, “Is fucking a plebeian any different from fucking an alpha of noble birth?”

Jimin purses his lips. “Not much different from fucking a stableboy, I guess.”

The omega’s eyes darken before crinkling at the sides. “I *knew* it. A knot is a knot even when its owner has no title, right? And *what* a knot you have found for yourself, I must say.”

Jimin raises an eyebrow. “You’ve seen it?” Has Jeongguk already fucked someone else out in the open?

“Oh, no, Your Grace. But I’ve heard the rumors. Everyone has.” He winks, swirling the clear liquid in his glass. “But I must say—the clothes you picked for him do enhance some of his,

ah, *finer* qualities.”

His mind nearly wanders into the dangerous memory of the night the Emperor forced him to look at Jeongguk’s nakedness. He didn’t like the feel of the Emperor’s hands on him. He didn’t like being forced to do the Emperor’s will.

He doesn’t like the memories.

“Indeed. I personally picked his wardrobe to please the Court. You’re all fervent lovers of the arts, and I know just how much you love to gaze at masterpieces,” Jimin says, imperceptibly lifting his eyebrows at Yoongi.

“And what a masterpiece he is. Are you quite satisfied with his services?”

A muscle twitches in Jimin’s jaw. So far, he hasn’t openly admitted to bedding the alpha, but if he answers this question truthfully, the Court will know he hasn’t used the Emperor’s *gift* yet. Will they think him even more frigid, *unnatural*? An abomination in the eyes of the Court of Depravity, for sure.

“Oh, yes. He’s truly a prodigy.”

The smile stretching on his face has never felt falser.

5.

“You refused to give them any detail,” Yoongi complains, back in Jimin’s chambers.

Jimin huffs and joins Ken in his efforts of unraveling him from his complicated robes. The sooner he sheds these ridiculous clothes, the sooner he can slip away in the barracks and blow off steam having a clandestine sword fight with Yoongi.

“I told them I bedded him. It’s more than enough.”

“You omitted the best part. The *details*.”

“I even smiled for them!”

“Oh, that was a smile?” Yoongi snorts. “I thought a servant stepped on your toe.”

“Leave me alone.”

“You said you wanted to duel with me, or have you forgotten already?”

“I changed my mind. I don’t want to be around you if you’re going to nag me the entire day,” Jimin says, slipping out from his Consort clothes. Ken hastily begins to help him dress in much more comfortable Empire-style casual clothes, which comprise *normal* pants fitted around the legs and a *normal* shirt.

“These should be looser around the legs,” Jimin complains out loud, glaring at Ken.

“I—I’m sorry, Your Grace. I could only find beta clothes, and they’re usually slimmer around the hips—”

Jimin groans, missing the looser clothes he used to wear at home. In Northrend, it isn’t unusual for highborn omegas to wear alpha clothes—it was either a matter of taste or convenience, really. Here, omegas wear what the latest omega fashion dictates.

Which means flowy robes that only give the illusion of looseness, and instead feel like a prison.

A prison that makes you trip on your own feet five times a day.

“I will practice on my own.”

“Dueling takes two people.”

“What an astute observation.”

Yoongi scoffs. “Make sure no one sees you on your way there. You know you’re not allowed on the sparring grounds.”

“I am allowed anywhere. I am the Royal Consort,” Jimin states, pulling the hood of his nondescript cloak up. “And this is my palace. My grounds. My land.”

“*Omegas* aren’t allowed,” Yoongi corrects himself.

“I am no ordinary omega,” Jimin points out, leaving Yoongi alone in his bedchamber.

6.

He reaches the sparring grounds without anyone paying him any attention. Covered in his cloak from head to toe, he looks just like any other beta under the Emperor's service. He wasn't going to be found out unless anyone tried to take a good look at what was hiding beneath the hood, but the servants that he crossed in the maze of the palace's hallways were too busy with their duties to care about a lone beta strutting by.

He did have to avoid the more crowded parts of the palace, though. His heat is fast approaching, and though Jimin's scent is usually milder than the scent of Southern omegas, he did notice it was turning the slightly bit sweeter. His scent had been often compared to the smell of peaches, tangy and lightly sweet, nothing too overwhelming like the jasmine or lavender of so many omegas in the Court. Still, it is fairly recognizable as his own, so he thought it wise to avoid crowds.

No one should be around at this hour.

The sun is a fiery disc of molten gold drowning in a sea of dark trees, leaving the sky bleeding smudged pink. It's a pretty sight. If there's one thing he likes about the South, it's its sunsets—the sun does look more radiant in these lands. The colors of the sky are more intense: cobalt blue, blood red, gold. The colors of royals.

He makes his way inside the empty sparring grounds. He's barely stepped over the threshold when he catches movement from the corner of his eye.

He whirls around, thinking he's going to be met with a guard late to dinner. What he finds instead, is a very familiar mop of wavy dark hair falling over eyes looking straight at him.

"Your Grace? Is that you?"

He sighs. Of course he's able to sniff him apart. There's no other sweet-smelling omega around covering for him, no fragrant rose bush diluting his scent, and the breeze is blowing right in the alpha's direction. Stupid scents.

"Jeongguk. What are you doing here?"

"Just taking a look around, Your Grace. Familiarizing with the palace and the gardens."

"This isn't part of the gardens," Jimin says, gesturing to the sparring grounds.

Jeongguk's grin splits his face from ear to ear. "Apologies, Your Grace. I got lost on my way back to the palace."

Jimin regards him with suspicion.

"I guess I'm lucky I stumbled into you, my lord."

“I’m not going back to the palace,” Jimin points out, figuring Jeongguk has already seen him heading inside the sparring grounds.

“Indeed you aren’t. What are you doing here, Your Grace? This isn’t a place for omegas. Especially highborn omegas.”

Jimin walks inside the sparring grounds without caring to answer Jeongguk’s question. He hears the alpha following him inside at a safe distance—or perhaps *respectful* distance is the better term. He’s pretty sure that strong, sturdy Jeongguk thinks he’s got nothing to be wary about in the company of the Royal Consort.

“I am practicing,” Jimin finally explains, shrugging off the cloak and tossing it to the side. He walks to the weapon racks lining the walls and chooses a sword. It’s blunt, like practice weapons often are. Meaning it won’t slice through skin, but it can still leave an opponent bruised in blues and purples, if swung with enough force.

“Care to join me?”

Jimin tosses the practice sword to a baffled Jeongguk. It lands at his feet with a clang, disturbing the straw scattered across the floor.

“What’s this?” the alpha asks, prudent. Jimin takes another sword and weighs it in his hand.

“A sword.”

“What should I do with it?”

“Spar with me,” Jimin says—orders—circling around the alpha. He’s standing right in the middle of the empty ring.

He sees Jeongguk freezing up. “I am but a farmer’s son.”

“Are you?”

He keeps pacing around the alpha, scanning him up and down, assessing his strengths and possible weaknesses.

Strong and athletic, without a doubt. Probably a bit faster than he seems, though with his muscle mass he can’t be quicker than Jimin—alphas rarely are. Perhaps he can tire him out with enough quick attacks.

“You’re the Royal Consort,” Jeongguk points out.

“I am. Although I was someone else before,” Jimin says, finally coming to a halt. “Were you?”

Jeongguk picks up the sword like one picks up a dead rattlesnake. His grip around the hilt is loose, uncertain.

“We shouldn’t do this.”

Jimin dramatically looks around the empty space, arms stretched wide. “No one will know.”

The alpha shakes his head. “Is this a game?”

“Of course it is. We’re not going to fight to the death, Jeongguk.”

But the alpha looks at him with a frown. “No, I mean—are you playing mind games with me? Your Grace,” he adds quickly, as though afraid of sounding impolite.

“This is very much a *physical* game, alpha.”

“Are you trying to seduce me, Your Grace?”

It’s Jimin’s turn to look confused. He quickly schools his expression in something more neutral.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

But for a moment, he feels Jeongguk’s eyes rove over his body with an intensity that makes the exploding sky outside look like nothing but a spark in comparison. He’s instantly hyper-aware of wearing clothes that aren’t considered proper according to Empire standards, and from the way Jeongguk is staring at his thighs, he knows the alpha is having the same thoughts.

“Because this is what it looks like.”

“Shall I remind you whom you’re speaking to, alpha?”

Jeongguk bows his head graciously, a hint of a smile on his lips. “Your Grace. My apologies. I was just joking.”

Jimin’s patience is growing thin. His hands itch to swing the sword at something, *hard*. No matter who the target is, if a practice dummy or an alpha with sunsets for eyes.

“Tell you what,” Jimin starts, feeling bold. “You beat me, and I’ll lie with you tonight.”

Jeongguk’s eyebrows shoot up. “Your Grace?”

“You heard me.”

Jimin glances down at Jeongguk’s grip. It’s less clumsy and more determined, but it loosens again after a heartbeat. He narrows his eyes at the alpha.

Jeongguk huffs, his smile dying with a downward twitch. “You already know the outcome of this fight, my lord.”

He does. The alpha has no intention to win against him—whether it’s because he’s got something to hide or he’s afraid to beat a member of the royal family, Jimin can’t say.

He knows he’s going to win either way.

“Maybe you’ll surprise me.”

He raises his sword, the flat of his blade an inch from his nose. He bows imperceptibly, as it is custom when starting a duel. He watches Jeongguk slowly do the same, blade a breath away from his face.

They start. Jimin is the first to attack, as Jeongguk’s body language had already betrayed his unwillingness to strike first. He charges, sweeping his sword up and high and creating an opportunity for the alpha to lunge at his chest. He wants to see if Jeongguk’s instincts will kick in, but the alpha evades the blow and backtracks quickly.

Undeterred, Jimin lunges again. He aims at Jeongguk’s head, but the alpha dodges swiftly, circling around a practice dummy.

So this is how it’s going to be.

He’s not surprised when he strikes a third time and Jeongguk jumps back, kicking another practice dummy to the ground to slow him down. Jimin leaps over it and stalks toward the alpha, menacing.

“Too scared to fight?” he taunts him.

“I don’t think we’re on the same level, Your Grace.”

That might be true.

“You won’t know until you try.”

He leaps on him and this time, their swords clash. Jimin’s blade rakes down the length of Jeongguk’s sword with a jarring screeching that hurts his ears, but Jeongguk doesn’t flinch, and his arms don’t budge. He catches a whiff of the alpha’s scent for the first time since he’s met him. Resin and pine needles, morning dew and damp moss, the smell of a winter forest after raining. The woods of his childhood bloom in his mind’s eye and he inhales sharply, retreating quickly.

After taking a few steps back, Jimin finds he can breathe again—he’s in the sunny Empire again, where forests smell different, and the air is more stifling. He watches Jeongguk lowering his blade, still on guard, face no longer smiling.

“Did your father fight in the war?”

The question catches Jeongguk off guard. “Yes, of course he did. He came back when I was a boy, with a bad leg and a hatred for snow.”

Jimin hums, eyeing Jeongguk’s feet. *What a perfect stance.*

“So, how did he teach you how to fight if he got injured?”

He catches a glint of recognition in Jeongguk’s eyes. The alpha chuckles. “Oh, *he* didn’t. My brother did.”

“Your brother.”

“Yes.”

“Who also fought in the war.”

“Yes, my eldest brother. He’s fifteen years older than me,” Jeongguk explains, shrugging.

“Of course,” Jimin says. “Big family?”

“Like any other poor family in the countryside,” Jeongguk answers without missing a beat.

Jimin nods, unperturbed. Nearly the same expression is replicated on the alpha’s face, except that the corners of his lips are tugged up ever so slightly.

Jeongguk is *always* smiling. Perhaps it’s this particular detail what raises red flags in Jimin’s mind.

“We sparred a few times,” Jeongguk continues, walking closer. “I’m not good at it by any means, but I did learn how to parry a blow. It was the first thing my brother taught me.”

“That, and evading blows,” Jimin snorts, lifting a single eyebrow.

“Ah, no,” Jeongguk laughs. “That’s all me. My brother hits *hard*. I didn’t want to go to sleep all battered and bruised. Working in a farm with broken bones is not ideal, you know.”

“I guess I don’t know,” Jimin mutters. “But I can imagine.”

Jeongguk’s eyes widen slightly. “Apologies, Your Grace. I shouldn’t speak to you so informally.”

“You apologize too much,” Jimin says. “I’m not the Emperor. I will not hang you in the great hall if you so much as look at me wrong.”

“That’s a relief, then,” Jeongguk says, dipping his head in a shallow bow. He glances up at Jimin with a sort of amused expression. “I must say, Your Grace. I quite like how you do things around the palace.”

“With a heart of stone and immeasurable cruelty?” Jimin asks, parroting the Court’s words.

“No. With the *savoir faire* of a true leader. An Emperor.”

“I’m not an Emperor,” Jimin mutters. *Your words are treasonous*, but he doesn’t say the thought out loud. “I’m the Royal Consort.”

Jeongguk takes the sword from Jimin’s hand with a gentle hand. He puts both blades back in the weapon rack, humming.

“You’re new to the Empire, Your Grace. I don’t expect you to know everything about our royalty system.” He turns around with a small, enigmatic smile, and when his eyes catch the

light of a torch, the irises flash bright red. “Do you know what happens when an Emperor dies leaving no heir?”

Jimin frowns. “I don’t think I’ll ever know.”

“It’s good to have ambitions, Your Grace.” Jeongguk puts his hood up and walks to the door. Outside, the sun has completely set, leaving behind only a smudge of stars in the overcast sky. “There’s always more power for those who dare to seek it.”

7.

“Would you stop following me around like a lost puppy everywhere I go?” Jimin huffs, annoyed at the alpha’s stubbornness. He’s been trailing after him for days, hoping to be of service – exactly *which* service Jimin really doesn’t want to know, though he suspects it lines up with the reason why the Emperor employed him in the first place.

“You Grace, it is best if the Emperor sees us together,” Jeongguk replies.

“Best for me, or best for you?”

“For everyone involved,” Jeongguk says, casting him a meaningful glance that Jimin decides to ignore.

“Surely the Emperor doesn’t like to be reminded of the fact that he had to hire a peasant to adequately satisfy his Consort,” Jimin snaps, heading for the dining hall where the Emperor awaits.

The servants push the doors open and make way for him to go through. The Emperor sits at the head of the table as usual, with Taehyung and his omega wife at his right. On the other end of the table, Yoongi sits stiffly at the right of the Consort’s seat.

“Your Majesty,” Jimin greets him. He gives a nod to the other people in the room and takes his place at the table.

The Emperor raises his eyes for a moment, busy with the chicken in his plate. His beady eyes slide over to the entrance, where Jeongguk lingers still.

“Jeon!” The Emperor shouts, slamming a hand on the table. Taehyung’s wife flinches visibly, a hand over her heart.

“Your Majesty. Good evening.”

“Why don’t you join us for dinner?” the Emperor asks, waving a chicken leg around. “Tell me of your tales in bed. I want to know just how different the Consort can be when he spreads his legs for the lower classes.”

Yoongi chokes on his wine and coughs. Jimin’s hands clamp around the kitchenware on their own. He wonders about his chances of throwing the knife right through the Emperor’s right eye.

Hoseok, the Emperor’s beta attendant, holds out a chair for Jeongguk to sit in. Jimin sees them exchange a tense glance before both their gazes dart to opposite sides of the room. Jeongguk laughs nervously as he sits down next to Jimin.

“I’m afraid the Consort and I haven’t yet had the chance to know each other intimately, Your Majesty.”

The Emperor's gaze hardens as he shifts his attention to Jimin. "You told the Court you were fucking him."

"I did," Jimin answers matter-of-factly, stabbing a piece of meat with his fork.

"It isn't *true*." The Emperor sniffs the air and grimaces. "You stink of overripe fruit and rot. You're on your heat?"

"Your sense of smell has no match, Your Majesty."

"Quit joking around or you won't have a scent for much longer," the Emperor growls, his temper flaring.

Death threats. How very quaint.

His anger dies down when the only other omega in the room leans forward to whisper something to the Emperor. Taehyung's wife is a young, pretty omega from one of the richest families in the Empire, and her scent is reminiscent of a bouquet of flowers. No doubt the Emperor finds it infinitely refreshing, especially after having to sit with the rot of his Consort's scent stuck in his nose.

"Jeon. Don't you like the Royal Consort? I bet you've never fucked a Northerner before."

Jeongguk doesn't look the Emperor in the eyes as he shakes his head, looking vaguely embarrassed.

"I haven't, Your Majesty."

"I assure you their flesh isn't as cold as the stories tell. Don't be afraid, my friend, your cock will be warm enough up in there." He bursts into a raucous laugh, looking at Taehyung and his wife for validation. They both laugh, but it's rehearsed, fake to everyone's ears but the Emperor's.

"I'm sure the Consort is as passionate in bed as he is about his country," Jeongguk says, raising his chalice to Jimin. Jimin flashes him a cold look before addressing the Emperor.

"I don't meddle in *your* love affairs, Your Majesty. Why should you meddle in mine?"

"Because I'm the Emperor and I can do whatever I want, is the short answer. I'm sure you're smart enough to know that already, yes?" the Emperor answers, rolling his eyes like he's talking to a child. "Plus, I absolutely loathe your smell when you're in heat, my dearest. It smells like someone left a cart full of overripe peaches to rot under the sun. It's, quite frankly, nauseating."

"And you smell like death and smoke, but nobody has the guts to tell you to your face."

The table falls silent, and even the servants' silence seems to change quality. The Emperor stares at him for a long moment before bursting into loud laughter.

“And that’s why I keep you around, my lovely Consort. Because you’re pretty *and* you make me laugh.” He resumes eating with more enthusiasm than before, still looking at him with that pleased expression of his. “You and me are more alike than you think, dear. Sometimes I forget about that.”

The other commensals exchange nervous glances before starting to eat again. Jimin feels Yoongi relax at his right, while Jeongguk on the other side sits unusually straight, with more poise than one would expect from a simple farmer.

“Tomorrow’s the banquet for the victory at the Chionthar River,” the Emperor speaks again. “The whole Court is invited. The generals, too. I *expect* your scent to have subsided by then.” He throws Jimin a baleful look that makes his stomach knot. “Have I made myself clear?”

He opens his mouth to snap back, but he’s beaten to it by Yoongi.

“Crystal clear, Your Majesty,” his friend says, diplomatic smile in place. “I’ll make sure our young alpha fulfills his duties tonight.”

Jeongguk raises his eyebrows at the diplomat. Feeling his own anger start to swell, Jimin pushes off the table.

“I’m not hungry. I’ll see you tomorrow at the banquet.”

Smelling of rotten peaches, he thinks, stalking away. That *is a promise*.

8.

“Listen to me. It’s a great idea. *You* don’t have to fuck the alpha, and the *Emperor* won’t smell your heat.”

“I don’t want to wear Jeongguk’s shirt *to bed*.”

“Do you want to fuck him, then?” Yoongi yells, exasperated, pointing to the alpha languidly lying on Jimin’s chaise in the receiving room. Jeongguk looks up at Jimin expectantly.

“*No*,” Jimin hisses. “I want you both to leave my chambers and let me sleep. You’re giving me a headache, Yoongi.”

“I have had a headache nestling into my skull since the very day you married the Emperor, Jimin.”

Yoongi’s words nearly make him lose his cool. Jimin meets the diplomat’s gaze in the mirror, and the alpha freezes.

“I apologize, I didn’t—”

“Oh, how deep your suffering must have been since then, Yoongi. I understand. Going hunting with the alphas of the Court, participating in war meetings, going to and fro the palace as you please... must be immensely tiresome for you. Life here in the sunny, sunny Empire.”

Yoongi sighs, pinching his brows. “That was inconsiderate of me, Your Grace. My apologies.”

“If I may, Your Grace.” Jeongguk clears his throat to catch his attention. “I think Yoongi had a very astute idea. My scent will mask yours for a few hours, and the Emperor will be none the wiser. We have no other alternatives, really.”

“Your scent isn’t strong enough to cover a heat,” Jimin objects.

The alpha tilts his head to the side. “It won’t be as strong as it normally would be if we were to be intimate for a night, but I think it will suffice for an evening.”

Jimin tears one of his earrings away with a little more strength than intended. Control is slipping off his fingers, he knows the signs. They’re all there.

Too many things getting under his skin. Too many people.

“I don’t want to smell like you.”

“And I don’t want the Emperor to get mad at us, Your Grace,” Jeongguk says, serious. “I promise my scent will vanish in a matter of hours.”

Yoongi hums, nodding. “You will excuse yourself before midnight, say you’re tired because of your heat—which is perfectly believable—”

“And I will follow you to your chambers, which is what the Emperor expect of me,” Jeongguk adds. “We can part ways once we’re both in the royal wing.”

“You seem to have thought this through,” Jimin mumbles.

Yoongi’s eyes soften. “I care about you, Jimin. I don’t want the Emperor to hurt you.”

Jeongguk smiles. “And *I* would like to live a long, comfortable life.”

Yoongi sits heavily in one of the armchairs, snorting. “Are we talking about your big plans of fucking your way to old age?”

“There’s more to me than just my cock, Min.”

“Are we sure about that?” the diplomat answers, inspecting his nails.

“Can’t you take it outside?” Jimin says, vexed. “Jeongguk, get me one of your shirts. Yoongi, I wish you could take me out for the night with some chloroform right about now.”

Yoongi smiles at him from the mirror.

“Don’t be so difficult. I hear omegas in heat sleep like *babies* with the scent of alpha around.”

9.

When Jimin shows up to the banquet hall the next evening, it is with the smell of pine needles and resin clinging to his skin.

Upon waking up that morning, he smelled it immediately. Jeongguk's scent was *strong*. Strong enough that he'd dreamed of the woods back home, of horse rides in the mountains and clumps of viscous resin sticking to his hair.

The scent followed him all day long. Yoongi had twisted his nose, but his expression had been a pleased one. His plan was going to work out.

Jimin didn't see Jeongguk anywhere that day. It was for the better. He wasn't exactly anticipating the moment they would eventually meet with the smell of the alpha on himself. He found it demeaning—*improper*. They weren't bound, and he wasn't his lover. Yet he smelled like him. He had trouble wrapping his head around it. *This is wrong*. He couldn't find the scent of peaches anywhere.

Walking through the monumental double doors of the banquet hall, Jimin smells it stronger than ever—it's as if Jeongguk's scent is trying to overcompensate for the myriad of omega, alpha, and beta scents wafting through the spacious hall. He feels dizzy for a moment, dew and hoarfrost and moss and bark spiking up his nose, piercing his brain. It's painful before it turns—*pleasant*.

This deep homesickness he found in the alpha's scent feels so familiar yet so bizarre. If he were to close his eyes, he'd see home.

But he doesn't, and he can't. Everyone is looking at the Royal Consort making his way across the hall to reach the dais on the other side of the chamber, where the Emperor and the highest functionaries of the Court sit, dominating over the rest of the nobility. He spots Jeongguk sitting to the right of the Consort's seat. Jimin's chair is exactly between Jeongguk and Emperor Jihan.

A manservant holds the chair back for him to sit down. Feeling the eyes of at least half the Court on him, Jimin takes his place next to the Emperor, head held high and not a glance to his husband or the alpha at his right.

He isn't sure which is more overpowering—the smell of a forest burned to ashes, or of winter blooming over familiar mountains.

Jimin holds his breath. Days like these, he hates his heats with a burning passion.

But there's always someone who hates them more than him. The Emperor's lips tug slightly downwards, but he doesn't comment on Jimin's smell. Perhaps Yoongi's plan has truly worked, perhaps the smell of rot has been subsided by Jeongguk's alpha scent.

Or perhaps the Emperor doesn't like how the two mingle together. It wouldn't be surprising, either.

“My loyal subjects,” the Emperor starts solemnly, arms spread wide as if to embrace the whole chamber. “Members of this esteemed Court. My lovely Consort.” He turns slightly to bow his head imperceptibly at Jimin. “We all know why we’re gathered here. Our success at the Chionthar River will play a key role in our inevitable victory against our barbaric neighbors to the West. The end of the war is nigh!”

“How can he say that when thousands of his soldiers have died?” Jimin hears Jeongguk mutter under his breath. He turns to the alpha in surprise. Jeongguk’s expression is serene but detached, and Jimin nearly second-guesses his hearing.

“Drink up, eat to your heart’s content, and have fun, for the radiant sun of the Empire will soon rise victorious over our lands once again!”

The Emperor’s speech is followed by enthusiastic applause and cheering. Music starts immediately after, accompanying the sound of boisterous laughter and the clatter of silverware against plates.

Jimin stares at the dishes in front of him, queasy. Heats dramatically lessen his appetite to the point he must be constantly reminded to eat by friends and servants.

“You’re not eating, Your Grace?”

Jeongguk’s voice cuts through the chattering like a hot blade cuts through butter. Perhaps he’s got more attuned to the alpha’s presence because of the lingering scent around him.

He shakes his head.

“I’m never hungry when I’m on my heat.”

“They must be painful,” Jeongguk says, helping himself to a bit of everything on the table. “Heats. I knew an omega back in the village who couldn’t get out of bed for days whenever they hit. She always reemerged from her house looking like a ghost.”

“It’s worse for female omegas,” Jimin shrugs, still refusing to meet anyone’s eyes. He focuses his attention on a single alpha shoving as many meatballs in his mouth as he physically can, and then regrets it instantly. His stomach churns.

“Of course,” he hears Jeongguk murmur. Maybe the alpha has finally picked up on the fact that he doesn’t want to make idle conversation.

But the alpha continues, undeterred. “Yoongi’s plan seems to have worked out. Has the Emperor complained yet?”

Jimin finally turns to look at him. Jeongguk looks dashing as always in the creamy whites and deep blues of his pristine courtier clothes. *He looks like he belongs.* How could that be?

“No, he hasn’t. But the night is still young, and he’s sitting right next to me. Unless *we* strip naked and swap all of our clothes before your scent on me wanes, he’s going to smell me soon.”

Jeongguk freezes with a piece of bread halfway to his mouth.

“I bet I’d look good in your robes,” he says, grinning. “Your Grace.”

Jimin regards him with cold eyes. “You wouldn’t last a *second* in these clothes. It’s like being trapped in a cocoon of expensive bed sheets—or drapes, depending on the weight. You wouldn’t even know how to walk in them.”

“You seem to have found a way to walk just fine,” Jeongguk says matter-of-factly. “Your Grace,” he adds again a heartbeat later.

Jimin frowns at the alpha’s impudence. Jeongguk knows how to be subtle enough with his cheeky one-liners as to not openly anger him, all the while keeping the usual smug grin pasted on his face—Jimin finds it vexing, but a little intriguing as well.

“How did you know we’ve lost thousands of soldiers at the border?” Jimin inquires, curious.

Jeongguk shrugs.

“Word travels fast. The palace has couriers running to and fro the front lines every other day. I heard the rumors.”

Jimin glances at the Emperor, currently too busy laughing at his own bad jokes to pay him any attention. “He’s throwing a party because he considers the loss of a whole battalion to win a single battle a *success*,” he says through gritted teeth, chalice held up to hide the movement of his lips from prying eyes. “We’re losing the war and he celebrates the victory of an inconsequential battle.”

“It’s... rather unusual,” Jeongguk admits, tilting his head to one side. “But I guess the Court needs constant entertainment to remain positive. It’s a well-known fact that the nobility likes —*needs* to find joy even in the darkest of times, Your Grace.”

“And how do you know such *facts*,” Jimin asks, skeptical, “son of a farmer?”

Jeongguk’s smile grows even wider. “You’d know as well if you were a citizen of the Empire.”

Jimin’s eyes flash dangerously. “I *am* a citizen of the Empire. I became one the day I stepped on this land.”

The alpha seems to realize his mistake, confident smile vanishing like mist dissolved by the sun.

“It seems I have misjudged you, Your Grace. I thought it would be harder for someone like you to accept becoming a Southerner, but I was wrong.”

“Someone like me?” Jimin repeats. “Like *what*, exactly?” His scent flares—peaches, not pine needles.

“Someone who once belonged to the ruling family of Northrend.”

“I stopped being a Northerner the day I married the Empire.”

“You mean the day you married the Emperor, Your Grace?”

Jimin pours wine in his empty chalice until the liquid almost overflows from the cup. “I meant what I said.”

Jeongguk takes a while before speaking again.

“You must have a great heart indeed, Your Grace, to find love for this country even when its ruler is...”

“Are your next words going to be treasonous, alpha?” Jimin asks, nursing his wine.

“Not at all. I love my country and my ruler,” Jeongguk answers, smiling. It sounds rehearsed and flat, it sounds precisely like Jeongguk *wants* it to sound. “I wish only the best for the Empire.”

“Then we’re of like mind.”

Jimin sweeps the hall with narrowed eyes. He became a member of the royal family – a Southerner in everything but looks, and, well, behavior—nearly half a year ago, and yet sometimes he still finds himself marveling at the lavishness of the palace. The castle he’d grown up in in Northrend was beautiful, of course, and large enough to host a number of vassal nobles and their families during tournaments and important holidays. But it was uncommon for guests and servants to lose their way in his father’s castle, while it’s quite a common occurrence in the palace.

The banquet hall is one of the biggest and most magnificent of the palace’s halls. Here, the royal family holds balls, hosts parties, celebrates the most important victories. Three great gilded chandeliers dangle from the vaulted ceiling, lit with a hundred candles each casting their bright light on the exquisite frescoes on the walls, on the statues of old emperors and empresses, and finally on the commensals.

The Court is an explosion of color, cheerful laughter and ear-shattering shouting. He glimpses a gaggle of omegas all spruced up in the Empire’s latest fashion, their sinuous bodies wrapped up like mouth-watering candies in the most exquisite silks and velvets from all around the continent. To the other side of the hall, where the music is loudest, the commensals have stopped eating to accompany the musicians with clapping and off-tune singing. He spots several betas and omegas perched atop the laps of notorious alphas—most of them members of the clergy or high functionaries. He doesn’t recognize any generals among them.

A much quieter table catches Jimin’s attention, one where lonely men sit in silence with their heads lowered and eyes downcast. The cheer of the celebrations hasn’t reached them, it seems.

Soldiers. All of them. At least half wear casts and heavy bandages, many of which are beginning to get soaked in blood. They're not singing, nor cheering, nor gossiping. Some are eating, and those without arms or hands are being helped by servants or by their more fortunate comrades. Jimin downs the rest of his wine and starts making his way to their table.

The celebrations have gotten so rambunctious that nobody spares Jimin a single glance as he glides across the hall. He's behind the Commander General in a heartbeat, as he didn't waste his time in trying to slow down in case someone with a sober mind wondered why the Royal Consort was able to walk at such brisk pace while wrapped up in his ridiculous clothes.

"Commander," Jimin greets him. The man startles and whips around, hand flying at the weapon at his side.

Commander General Kim Namjoon, one of the best strategists in the Empire despite his relatively young age, relaxes immediately when he realizes who it is that called him. A slow blush creeps up his face, and he bows stiffly.

"Apologies, Your Grace. Nerves, you see. Some days I think I'm still on the blasted battlefield."

"We're all on edge because of the war, Commander," Jimin says, claiming the empty seat next to him. The man's eyes widen in surprise, but he's quick to hide it.

"Are you sure? They look fine to me," the Commander says bitterly, watching the courtiers dancing and playing and eating the night away.

"I guess some people are more on edge than others," Jimin concedes. "The Emperor doesn't like to be reminded he's losing a war. So, he throws parties for the handful of battles he can win."

"Win," the Commander repeats, savoring the word like he's swirling wine on his tongue. "I would love to win again, one day. This isn't a victory. This is a farce."

"Your men aren't laughing," Jimin points out. "Neither are you."

He glimpses Jeongguk leaning against a column, hidden away behind the row of servants waiting to be called on. When did he get there?

"Never did like the Emperor's sense of humor," the Commander mutters, spitting on the floor.

"That makes two of us."

The man raises his eyebrows at Jimin. He can see suspicion seep in the brown of Kim Namjoon's irises, and wariness too. "I gather *you* didn't participate in hosting this particular party, Your Grace."

"I don't find the death of thousands of men a good reason to celebrate, no," Jimin says curtly. "Commander, your reputation precedes you. Even as an omega living in my father's Court in

the North, I knew your name. So, how come we're losing the war? You're used to wage wars on enemies way more formidable than our neighbors in the West."

He notices Jeongguk shift in his corner, shuffle closer to better listen to their conversation.

"You've seen how the Emperor wages his wars. The war room is his playground, the war table his favorite toy."

"He thinks he's playing with wooden toy soldiers," Jimin agrees, voice very low.

"He might as well sell the entire country to the enemy. Sure, the Empire is vast—we don't lack for soldiers. But in war, men die. And in the *Emperor's* wars," the Commander glares at the Emperor perched up on his throne, "—men die like flies."

Jimin looks at the rest of the table. A not-so-subtle stink of blood and rot hangs around the soldiers, sticking to their uniforms. Jimin wonders whether the Emperor will be able to smell it on him too, when he goes to take his seat next to him again. Who knows, he might prefer it to the smell of his heat—after all, he's always enjoyed death.

"Your sacrifices cannot be in vain," Jimin murmurs, more to himself than to the Commander.

"They will be so long as we let the Emperor dabble in war strategy," the Commander says, chuckling darkly. "Somebody needs to tell him he's shit at playing war."

"Whoever says that will have their head chopped off."

"Then I hope it isn't you, Your Grace," the Commander says. "I quite like how your head thinks."

The Commander raises his chalice at him and drinks. Jimin stares at him pensively, fidgeting with the sleeves of his robes.

"Send me the names of the injured soldiers that the Emperor invited at Court. If I can't do anything for the tens of thousands of soldiers in the battlefield, I want to at least try to be of some use to these ones."

"Your Grace, you're too generous. It seems like the whispers around you are completely wrong."

Jimin waves a hand, dismissive. "I don't mind the rumors. Half the court is too scared to approach me, and it's fine by me."

"But what about the other half, Your Grace? The ones who are unafraid," the Commander says. "Mind *them*. I'd suggest befriending them. I'm sure you could charm the whole Court if you wanted, Your Grace. It's just a matter of will."

And with that, the Commander turns to his plate and resumes eating his cold dinner.

“I didn’t know my husband also hired you as my bodyguard,” Jimin hisses, walking past Jeongguk. The alpha matches his stride to Jimin’s as they head back to the dais, ignoring the party raging around them.

“He didn’t. But I don’t trust the guards, they seem a little tipsy. Someone must’ve slipped them some wine.”

Jimin snorts. “I would not be surprised.”

“What do you hate most of the Empire, Your Grace?” Jeongguk asks, courteously holding Jimin’s chair out for him at the table.

Jimin surveys him with cautious indifference, then sits. “Why should I tell you?”

“Just trying to make friendly conversation.”

“You’re not an omega of the Court. You don’t need to entertain me.”

“Many people—including my employer, your husband—would strongly disagree with that, Your Grace. I’m *very* much here to entertain you.”

“Not with words,” Jimin says, flashing him a warning look.

“You don’t seem inclined to make any use of my specific set of skills anytime soon, so words are all that I can offer.” Jeongguk smiles charmingly, eyes alight with mirth. “For now.”

“*Forever*,” Jimin precises. Jeongguk’s chuckle tickles his ears. He wants to scratch it away, lose it in the music and the chattering of the party.

“Indulge me.”

Jimin holds back a sigh. Lately, he feels it’s the only thing he does—he’s a being made of sighs, long sighs and drawn-out sighs and small sighs and all the other kinds of dramatic exhalations, all trapped inside his lungs, pushing at his organs to break free. One day they’re going to burst out of his body and sweep these halls like a gale sweeps across the oceans.

“Hate is a strong word. There’s not much I hate here.”

“There isn’t?” Jeongguk cocks an eyebrow, looking politely skeptical. His eyes slide to the figure of the Emperor at Jimin’s side. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but I find that hard to believe.”

“Hatred pushes you into action,” Jimin says. “Makes you act recklessly, carelessly. For example, hating someone means you’ll soon feel the itch to plunge a dagger into their heart. *One* bad day, and you might just act on this impulse.”

Jeongguk regards him with amusement. “Do you want to stab someone in the heart, Your Grace?”

“Me?” He rolls his eyes. “Omegas are forbidden to carry weapons. You’re a Southerner. You should know.”

“We kinda like to bend the rules outside of the capital,” Jeongguk says. “Omegas have learned how to defend themselves. It’s just the ones at Court who are thought to be helpless.”

“That’s because they’re *taught* how to be helpless.”

The alpha tilts his head. “Sometimes you speak like you don’t belong to their ranks, Your Grace.”

Jimin grimaces. “I was raised differently. I told you. One day, I’d like to…”

His voice thins out, disappearing into the cacophony of music and laughter. He hears the echo of his husband’s sneering laugh in his ears, and he smoothens out his expression.

“Never mind. Some wishes are not meant to come true.”

“Do you resent them?” Jeongguk asks, nodding toward the courtiers. “The omegas in the palace. The ones who spread false rumors about you, and the ones who fear you.”

“They don’t know any better.”

“True,” Jeongguk muses. “Life at Court corrupts even the purest of souls.”

He feels Jeongguk’s eyes on him.

“You’re very compassionate, Your Grace,” Jeongguk ponders, leaning forward. “I hope the Emperor learns a thing or two from you—in time.”

“What if *I* learn a thing or two from him?”

This time he turns to look at Jeongguk. The alpha’s gaze is piercing, as if he were trying to read his thoughts.

“What might you learn from him that you don’t already know?”

“Violence,” Jimin says. “And hatred.”

“A dagger in someone’s heart?”

Jimin catches himself before he lets a smile slip on his lips.

“I guess I hate that it never snows here.”

10.

The quick knock at his doors announces that he's got a visitor, and not just any visitor. Jimin rises to his feet when the Emperor wobbles inside his bedchamber on unsteady legs, the alcohol he'd imbibed that night fogging his eyes.

"Consort."

He trips on his feet and nearly falls over an armchair. The butler readily steadies him back on his feet.

The Emperor turns his nose, grimacing. "That stink is back," he says, swallowing his words. "The stench of peaches."

"It is what I smell like, husband."

"Nobody had told me that," The Emperor mumbles. He grips the back of the armchair and shoos the butler away with an impatient hand. His face is ruddy and blotched, and there's a purple stain on his white shirt. "Do your other siblings all smell like you?"

"No, Your Majesty." Her omega sister smelled like junipers, and his omega brother had a milky scent to him that always reminded Jimin of late-night visits to the castle's kitchens to steal milk and honey with his siblings. He feels a pang of nostalgia at the memory.

"Your portraits should have come with a sample of your scents. How else would an alpha choose whom to wed? A pleasant smell is essential to a good marriage. I can't fuck you if I hate how you smell like."

"Fortunately, my dear husband, there's no need for us to perform marital duties. I can bear you no child, hence the royal concubine," Jimin says seraphically. "My lord father hand-picked her specifically for her exceptional fertility—and your pleasure. She'll bear you a child with a striking resemblance to my family, as the blood of the North runs strong in her veins. You needn't worry, your heir will look like you just as much as he'll look like me."

He offers the Emperor a small mocking smile, confiding in the fact that his vision is too fuzzy to discern a genuine smile from a false one.

The Emperor grunts his displeasure. "Where's the boy?"

"Which boy?"

"The alpha. The one who should fuck the acid out of you."

"He's in his rooms," Jimin says curtly. He's had enough alpha smell on him for months. He can't wait to take a bath.

"Well, call him back," the Emperor grunts. "Your heat clearly hasn't passed, and you still reek of the same sickeningly sweet smell. You'll stink out the whole palace, and the Court

will think their Emperor is not capable of satisfying his Consort.”

“Which is the truth,” Jimin whispers.

“Did you say something?”

“Not at all,” Jimin deadpans. “I’ll call him right now.”

He glances at Ken, and the servant disappears behind the doors. He’ll just send Jeongguk back as soon as the Emperor retires to his apartments, on the other side of the royal wing.

Jeongguk arrives not thirty seconds later, his hair slightly disheveled and damp from a bath. His earthy scent is less intense now, wafting faintly around him like the residue of a dream.

“You called, Your Grace?”

“No. The Emperor did.” Jimin turns toward his husband, inquisitive. “Perhaps *he* would like your services tonight.”

“Shut up or I’ll cut your tongue out, omega,” the Emperor barks. “The Court doesn’t need a speaking Consort. Remember that.”

Jimin bites his tongue. Jeongguk’s eyes flicker from him to the Emperor to him again.

The Emperor slumps on the armchair and crosses his legs over the armrest. “Well, what are you waiting for?” He looks at Jeongguk and waves a hand toward Jimin. “Go ahead. Let me see how you fuck my omega on his heat.”

Jeongguk frowns, and a slimy coil of unease stirs in Jimin’s stomach, slow and cold like a snake. Of course, *of course* he’s here to completely ruin his night.

“Your Majesty?”

“Did I stutter?” The Emperor looks around to the servants in the room. “Does your Emperor stutter?”

Ken steps up, back as rigid as a slab of stone. “No, Your Majesty.” He steps back.

“Does the *omega on his heat* not have a say in this?” Jimin seethes, hiding his hands in the long, flared sleeves of his robes. The shaking is barely there, but he would rather the others not see it.

“No sane omega would say no to a good fuck when they have slick gushing out of their asshole,” the Emperor says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Unless you mean to say *yes fuck me please*, then no—you’re not allowed to speak, my dear.” He interlaces his fingers behind his head and sneers. “Get to it.”

A cold shudder reels through Jimin. The sweat on his skin turns into a thin layer of ice. He smothers the growl that grows in his chest, like he’d learned to do in all his time in the

palace. He waves the servants away from his bedchamber and turns to the mirror to begin undressing.

“It’ll be quicker if you help me,” Jimin says to the reflection of a petrified Jeongguk. The tension in the alpha’s shoulders is evident, but his eyes are alert. He sees him walk up to the vanity table on uncertain legs. He begins unbinding Jimin’s robes one layer at a time.

Jeongguk’s presence at his back covers the reflection of the Emperor slumped in the armchair, but Jimin can feel the weight of his eyes, the anticipation of a good show. That’s exactly what Jimin won’t give him—a *good show*. He always regaled his husband with the most lifeless of performances whenever his husband felt the urge to fuck him. Ten minutes of boring thrusting in and out, of waiting for him to finally reach a pleasure he wasn’t willing to share.

Tedious work. Uncomfortable, at times. Always unwelcome.

His part in this will be the same.

“Oh, come on, you’re taking *ages*.”

Jeongguk is unceremoniously pushed aside by the Emperor, who grabs Jimin by the waist and shoves him against the table harshly. Jimin falls on his hands, wincing at his own reflection. He feels the unmistakable sound of fabric ripping, then rough hands bunching up the cloth around his thighs.

“You gotta take ‘em hard and fast, you don’t waste time *undoing their robes*,” the Emperor says from behind him. “What are you, his manservant? Tear his fucking clothes apart, he’s got way too many anyway.”

Head bent to avoid his reflection, Jimin does what he’s done countless times already—spread his legs and brace for the worst. Accepting his role as Royal Consort meant accepting the Emperor’s cock in his ass a few times a month, and as long as he didn’t hurt him or insisted on sharing a bed for the night, Jimin was willing to bear it.

Letting an unpleasant man fuck him in exchange for limited power over one of the biggest nations in the continent: that’s what he does. Jimin figured that in time, he could turn what *limited* power he started off with into something *more*. Spreading his legs obediently and attending to his husband’s whims has always been part of the plan.

Jimin hears a *thump* and suddenly the weight on his back is gone, along with the overwhelming smell of alcohol. He whips around in time to see the Emperor slump on the carpet, arms spread wide—unconscious.

He stares at Jeongguk in horror.

“*What did you do?*”

The alpha has a dagger in his hand, but his grip is wrong. The knife is upside down, and the blade isn’t stained with red.

“He’s alive, Your Grace. Just a friendly tap on the side of his head.”

“A friendly *tap*?” Jimin repeats, speechless. “He’s *unconscious* on my floor.”

“He tried to rape you, Your Grace.”

“He has taken me *countless* times already, Jeongguk. It’s what husbands do with their omegas.”

The dark sheen of Jeongguk’s eyes hardens into black ice. He looks at the body between them with ill-concealed disgust. “Then he’s raped you countless times, Your Grace.”

Jimin sighs, smoothening his robes down his legs. They’re all torn, ruined beyond repair. “Such is the way in the Court of Suns.”

“Then maybe we should change our ways.”

Jimin cocks an eyebrow. This new Jeongguk he’s got in front of him now—this new *alpha* whose scent is more pungent, muskier—he’s never glimpsed him behind the mask Jeongguk uses to wear at Court.

“By hitting the Emperor in the head with the butt of a dagger?”

“You said you don’t have enough hatred in you to aim for the heart, Your Grace.” Jeongguk offers him another one of his dashing smiles. He bows with a flourish, offering him the dagger by the hilt. “I’m here to please the Royal Consort in whichever way I can.”

“You’ve pleased me enough for one night,” Jimin mutters, stepping over the body. With the robes torn, he can crouch next to the unconscious Emperor to examine his sleeping face. He’s got a beatific expression on, and he’s snoring lightly.

“Sleeping like a baby,” comes Jeongguk’s pleased comment.

“He might wake up with a bump on his head.”

“We’ll say he slipped and hit his head on the table. Perhaps he’ll order all your furniture to the pyre for high treason.”

Jimin can’t keep a smile from curling his lips. “Everyone in the palace *did* see how drunk he was.”

“See? You’re catching on, Your Grace. You don’t need to worry.”

Jimin straightens up. “Call the guards. Say the Emperor has fallen into a drunken stupor and injured himself in the process.”

“I bet it’s not the first time they hear those same words.”

He watches the alpha walk out of his bedchamber with an unusual spring in his step. Jimin nudges the Emperor with the point of his foot. No response.

Perhaps this *gift* his husband has so thoughtfully given him to do as he pleases—perhaps he can find a use for this alpha after all.

11.

It's nearly sundown when Jimin shows up at Jeongguk's door, the hood of his dark cloak up and over his eyes.

Jeongguk tilts his head when he sees him, confused. "Your Grace? Is that you?"

"Perceptive as always, Jeongguk. Who else do you think would dare visit the Consort's lover at this hour?"

"And dressed like a thief in the night, no less." Jeongguk scans him up and down, eyebrows creasing slightly. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Don't be ridiculous, I can't leave the palace grounds. But yes, I'm going some *place*, and you're coming with me."

Jeongguk stares back, puzzled. "I am?"

Jimin turns around and begins descending the stairs to the lower floors.

"W—wait, Your Grace? Where are we going?"

He hears Jeongguk shut the door and follow him after a few seconds. When he glances over his shoulder, he sees the alpha has also grabbed a cloak to drape over his back.

"We aren't leaving the palace, don't worry."

"Am I expected to finally fulfil the duties I was employed for, Your Grace?"

He catches the teasing in Jeongguk's voice and halts mid-step, quickly turning around to face him. Jeongguk almost crashes into him, but then he catches himself at the last second with a hand on the banister.

"Don't you like getting paid for doing nothing?"

"Forgive my forwardness, Your Grace, but I wouldn't mind doing what I was hired to do." Jeongguk flashes him the most brazen of smiles. "Even if I were called to do my job, I wouldn't certainly complain."

"Nor should you, since you're here at the expenses of the crown. Not to mention that serving any member of the Royalty is an honor in and of itself."

Jeongguk bows his head slightly, mirth glinting in his dark eyes. "It is my honor to follow you around the palace, Your Grace."

"Good."

He turns back and descends down the stairs, Jeongguk in tow. They walk down several hallways, crossing ways with the many servants making use of the service passageways

hidden in the walls to get from one part of the palace to the other without being noticed.

“Why don’t we use the servant’s passageways?” Jeongguk whispers, sidling up to him.

“Because they’re busy. They’re also pretty narrow, somebody’s servant might catch my scent and find out I’m using them to sneak around the palace.”

“*Somebody’s* servant, meaning the Emperor’s?”

“Mmh. I certainly don’t want Hoseok seeing me sneak around the palace dressed like this,” Jimin murmurs, shooting Jeongguk a sideways glance.

But the alpha’s expression remains neutral—suspiciously so. “I don’t think you need to worry about that one. Looks pretty harmless to me.”

He leads Jeongguk through a series of maze-like hallways to a more secluded part of the palace, until they finally step into a disused grand hall. It’s completely empty, aside from a couple of withered philodendrons next to the covered windows.

“It’s really dusty in here,” Jeongguk says, sniffing, looking around the empty space. Jimin sees him take the hall in with great interest, eyes lingering on the cold fireplace, the barred windows, the stained wallpaper. His dark eyes finally settle on the disturbed dust on the floor.

“This wing has been abandoned for years. Something to do with an epidemic of some sort, might have been pox, might have been something else. Rumor has it the Empress of that time gathered everyone in the palace who showed signs of the sickness and trapped them in this part of the palace to burn them all.”

“This chamber doesn’t show any sign of such a great fire,” Jeongguk says, inspecting the walls. A rat scurries away, disturbed by their presence. “The walls should be blackened and charred.”

“It’s just a legend to scare the Court. Have them remember that they’re disposable, and that the Emperor could decide to get rid of them any day.”

He crosses the hall, reaching the set of doors on the other side. His footsteps echo throughout the chamber, loud and lonely.

He waits for Jeongguk to follow him before pushing them open.

“It’s... what is this?” Jeongguk asks, stepping inside. “A classroom?”

He spins around to take the smaller chamber in. The walls are lined with bookshelves, although only about half are filled with books. There are four rows of desks in the center of the room, and a big blackboard on the opposite wall. The windows here aren’t barred, but they’re covered by heavy velvet curtains that shield the chamber from the sun.

“It’s exactly what it looks like.”

Jimin pushes the hood from his face and walks to one of the windows. He pushes the curtains aside, letting a bit of the waning light stream in. Particles of dust dance around Jeongguk's face for a moment, and the brown irises of his eyes glitter with specks of gold. *It's the setting sun*, Jimin says to himself. Anyone can be beautiful when kissed by an Empire sunset.

"What kind of school is this?"

"A school for anyone who wants to learn," Jimin says. "Mainly omegas. Most are servants, although there's a couple of minor nobles who have reached out to me lately."

"Members of the Court? I thought they didn't like you," Jeongguk says. He walks toward the blackboard, swiping the pads of his fingers on the polished wood of the desks. There isn't any dust on them. "Your Grace," he quickly adds, almost apologetically. Jimin shoots him a small smile.

"Seems like you were wrong. I can't blame you, you're new to Court life. There's always more than meets the eye. Some omegas in the Empire yearn for change—it might as well start with learning how to read. Did you know most omegas in the Court have difficulty reading the simplest of books?"

"Omegas in the countryside rarely know how to write their own names, so... yeah, it doesn't surprise me."

"Well, it's inconceivable to me. Every omega in my father's Court receives an education, and that means being able to have conversations that aren't only about hats and who slept with whom."

"So, you set up a secret school under the Emperor's nose in the hopes that, one day, you might have someone of like mind with which to converse about..." He picks up a couple books from the shelves. "... philosophy and history of the arts. Is that right, Your Grace?"

Jimin rolls his eyes. "That, and I truly want the omegas here to break free from the chains of ignorance. It's been too long already, the rest of the continent has moved on from this... obsolete view of regarding omegas."

"I think some alphas are afraid omegas won't find them attractive once they learn how to read," Jeongguk says, chuckling. "They'll go ahead and read all those romance novels about falling in love with alphas who smell of rosewood and apple pies and lemon tarts and think—*why the hell should I stick around this dude who smells of smoked salmon?* I mean, I wouldn't blame them."

"You don't smell of smoked salmon."

Jeongguk smiles. "Is that a compliment, Your Grace?"

"Just a statement."

"What do I smell like to you?" Jeongguk asks again, walking closer. "*Your Grace.*"

“It’s rude to ask an omega what they smell in an alpha’s scent. Especially if the omega in question is the Royal Consort,” Jimin points out. A misstep, his fault. He won’t do it again. The sunset flares in Jeongguk’s eyes as he steps even closer to the window.

“I was just curious. I’ve been told my scent can be a little strong at times—*wild*, in a sense.”

“Did that flatter you?” Jimin asks, holding his breath. Earthy notes swirl around in his head, clouding his senses with pine, cut wood, amber, oakmoss. It’s too much and not enough at the same time, it’s the woods of his home and a new forest begging to be explored.

“I don’t think it’s wild. I can be pretty tame when I want to.”

“When *you* want to?”

Another charming smile, wildflowers blooming in the woods. “*And* when I’m ordered to.”

Jeongguk’s scent has grown so pungent, it now seems to flow along the blood in Jimin’s veins. He feels it everywhere, more insistent than the day he wore his shirt to sleep.

He walks past Jeongguk, further into the chamber—away.

“I brought you here for a reason.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“I think you should attend the school,” Jimin says offhandedly.

Jeongguk’s eyes widen in surprise. “Me?”

“Yes, you. It’s only proper that the Consort’s official lover should know how to read and write, no?”

“And here I thought the only thing a lover should know is how to use his—”

“I’m not using you *that way* so if you want to stick around, you’ll have to entertain me in other ways, Jeongguk.”

“Why don’t you send me away?”

Jimin shakes his head. “*He* won’t let me.”

Jeongguk hums. “I think he still suspects us. I’m not sure he was entirely convinced by your act on the day of the banquet.”

“Well, maybe you should sit closer to me next time we’re having dinner with the Court,” Jimin says, picking a random book from what it seems to be the children’s section of the classroom’s small library. “That way everyone will see how *close* we are.”

He knows Jeongguk isn’t happy with his answer, he knows the Emperor and the Court won’t be swayed by such an insignificant change. He opts to ignore the matter altogether for now

and focuses on the real reason why he brought the alpha here.

He hands Jeongguk the book. “Here. Open it on the first page.”

Jeongguk takes the book with a perplexed expression. He does as told, because the tone in Jimin’s voice is more commanding than exhortative.

The alpha opens the book at the very first page. Jimin knows there’s an author’s note regarding the methods chosen in teaching the alphabet to children—about two paragraphs’ worth of words. He sees Jeongguk’s eyes scan over the note, skimming through the page quickly, before the alpha shuts the book closed.

“I can’t read,” Jeongguk deadpans.

“I figured as much,” Jimin says, eyebrows raised. “You were nothing but a farmer mere weeks ago, after all. I didn’t have any expectations.”

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“Keep it. Come here a couple nights every week to attend classes, and you’ll be able to write and read like everyone else in the Court.”

“Except for the omegas,” Jeongguk points out.

“Like any other *alpha* in the Court, then,” Jimin says, correcting himself. “Don’t you want to be their equal? Be able to converse with them of politics, history, strategy? Alphas’ *things*. It’s only right, since you’re part of the Court now.”

“But you want these things to be taught to omegas too. They won’t be a prerogative of alphas anymore.”

“Yes, omegas and servants and people living in villages and towns far, far away from the capital,” Jimin explains. “Farmers should have a right to education. Were I the Emperor, I would set up schools all over the Empire. It’s what I’m trying to do as Royal Consort.”

“An admirable dream,” Jeongguk says. His expression is suddenly closed off, distant. He’s turning the little book over in his hands, pensive. “Will it be just that, I wonder—a dream?”

“Maybe I’ll be able to convince the Emperor, with time. I trust I can wear down his defenses with the due precautions.” Jimin presses his lips into a line and looks away, out the window, where the sun is but a flash of vicious gold on the horizon. “I’ll seclude myself in the furthest part of the palace during my heats, if necessary. I’ll douse myself with the scent of the Emperor’s favorite spring flower. It’s a game of give and take, and if I must give a little more to obtain even a crumb of what I want for this country, then I think it’s worth it.”

“You’re...” Jeongguk regards him with indecipherable eyes. “—really adamant about changing the Empire for the better.”

Jimin pulls the hood back over his eyes. “I’ve been chosen to lead this country at the Emperor’s side. I won’t be remembered as the Consort who did nothing for the Empire that

adopted him.”

With that, Jimin exits the classroom, leaving Jeongguk to follow after him in the growing darkness of the night.

12.

Entertaining the functionaries' omega spouses while they're meeting with the Emperor is always a dreary affair, more so in days when spring is in full bloom and the scent of the wisterias growing around the outer palace's walls is fragrant in the air. Jimin just wants to find a secluded bench nearby the flowers and read, without the Court fluttering around him like a swarm of moths attracted to flame.

Right now, Jimin wishes they would fly closer to him—so that he could burn their wings off.

But he's not a flame, and the omegas in the Court don't have wings. He sips his sweetened tea and grimaces—too sweet. He wonders if some poisons taste sweet, too.

One of the omegas he's sitting with smiles. She's one of the few he can stand, or one of the few that can stand *him*.

"Are you enjoying yourself, dear?"

"Immensely, lady Choi."

"You should grace us with your presence more often, Your Grace. I quite enjoy seeing them scatter away like pigeons whenever you walk in a room." Lady Choi giggles, glancing to a group of loud omegas standing to the side. They're nibbling at colorful macarons and sipping champagne and exchanging rumors, like any other day.

"You should know, they're still quite curious about your lover," lady Choi informs him. She regards Jeongguk, who's sitting beside Jimin on the sofa, with a mischievous smile. "They won't shut up about him until you give them crumbs. Or something to gossip about," she says, bringing a gloved hand up to her mouth to hide a chuckle.

Jeongguk smiles at the woman. "That's exactly what I keep telling him, but the Consort can be quite stubborn."

The lady Choi giggles some more, already ensnared by Jeongguk's dark eyes and handsome smile.

"*The Consort* enjoys his privacy," Jimin says without missing a beat. He sets his porcelain cup on the coffee table and smiles politely. "Would you mind giving us a minute, lady Choi? I'll find you again later."

"Of course, Your Grace. Take your time, you two."

She winks at them like she expects them to engage in explicit sexual acts in the middle of a social gathering—which isn't something anybody in the palace would be exceedingly surprised to see, to be honest.

Jimin watches her saunter away, heading for the refreshments. Once he's made sure she's out of earshot, he turns to Jeongguk with a frown.

“Your smell has changed.”

“It has?” Jeongguk answers casually, sipping champagne from a flute.

“It’s gotten—heavier.” It’s something he’d noticed since that day in the classroom, but lately it’s been almost too intense to ignore.

“I’m approaching my rut, Your Grace.”

Jimin hums. “When is it due?”

“The end of this week, probably.”

Jimin smoothens out the creases in his silk robes. “You have my permission to go fuck a maidservant or a stable boy, whichever is your preference. Just don’t do it inside the palace. Bring them to the barracks at night or in the stables, and make sure they don’t *talk* afterwards.”

Jeongguk looks him in the eyes, serious. “I’m afraid I can’t.”

Jimin scoffs. “Why not?”

“The Emperor ordered me to pleasure you and *only* you. If I were to be seen fornicating with a servant, he’d have my head on a silver platter the very next day.”

“Well, it’s *my* word against *his*,” Jimin says, but he knows he can’t win. Everyone will always fear the Emperor more than the Royal Consort.

Jeongguk smiles softly. “I’d rather keep my head, Your Grace. It’s got quite a handsome face on one side, I’ve been told.”

The corners of Jimin’s mouth twitch, but he doesn’t indulge in a smile. He gives Jeongguk a quick once-over instead, then says,

“I suppose it shall be just you and your hand, then.”

“It shall, indeed.”

Jimin licks his lips, feeling them dry. The overly sweet tea has left him parched, somehow.

“Who will you be thinking about?” he hears himself ask, recklessly—too recklessly. It’s an unusual question coming from him, and he knows Jeongguk is thinking the exact same thing as well. He looks taken aback by Jimin’s uncharacteristic curiosity.

“Your Grace?”

“Indulge me,” Jimin says, pouring himself a glass of water. Something to give his hands to do instead of uselessly fidgeting in his lap. “You can be honest with me. I won’t have you lashed if you say you fancy one of the servants. I’ve seen the way you look at the Emperor’s attendant.”

Jeongguk's smile wavers before growing wider, and he laughs. "Hoseok? I don't think of him that way."

Jimin cocks an eyebrow. He'd seen the alpha cast sneaky glances at the red-haired manservant from time to time, and the beta respond to his glances when he thought he wasn't being watched. He thought something was going on between the two, but he didn't exactly know the nature of their relationship yet.

"Who's in your dreams, then? If you don't mind me asking."

"Are you *demanding* an answer from me, Your Grace?"

Jimin brings the glass to his lips, but doesn't drink from it yet. "You're free to keep your secrets."

"I shall keep that name to myself, then." Jeongguk bows his head politely, eyes never leaving Jimin's.

But something in Jimin keeps pushing to ask *more* questions, find out *more*. He keeps telling himself it's because the alpha has this mysterious aura about him, and heaps of secrets stored in the darkest recesses of his eyes—Jimin longs to bring them all to the surface, one by one.

"Do you have a sweetheart back home?"

Jeongguk chuckles. "I used to have one. Back at the village."

"What happened to them?"

"Pox."

"Oh."

He should feel bad, he doesn't. He wonders if he really has grown a heart of snow in the torrid climate of the Court of Suns.

"It killed a third of the village. It's alright, we weren't promised to each other or anything. I braced for the worst the second they found pustules on the back of the first victim." He takes another sip of champagne, then smiles. "I was just lucky it didn't get me."

"*And* your family," Jimin says.

"*And* my family as well, of course."

"None of them caught the pox?" Jimin inquires, suddenly curious.

"No, none of them."

"I remember you saying you have a very big family. How many siblings, exactly?"

Jeongguk scratches the glass with his fingernail. "There's seven of us. I'm in the middle."

“A middle child,” Jimin says. He tilts his head to the side, staring deep into Jeongguk’s eyes. The alpha stopped blinking. “Yes, I can see it. I have younger siblings. Mine is a big family as well.”

“Finally, something to bond over, Your Grace,”

“And the brother who taught you how to use a sword,” Jimin continues, scooting closer to Jeongguk on the sofa. The alpha’s scent spikes ever so slightly, summer rain over a blanket of moss. “He was the second born, right? You mentioned it before.”

“H-He was—I mean, he *is*.” Jeongguk chuckles, a little breathlessly. “The war hasn’t killed him yet. Although it might very soon, if the Emperor insists with his... strategies.”

“You don’t seem very worried.”

“As you said, Your Grace, I have a really big family. I’m afraid I am not as close with my siblings as you seem to be with yours.”

Jeongguk isn’t trying to back away, but his body language makes it clear enough that he’s being affected by his omega scent. Jimin briefly wonders if he likes the smell of peaches.

“I guess it’s fair,” Jimin mutters, drawing away. Jeongguk relaxes imperceptibly—his jaw loosens, his fists splay over his thighs to rub at the fabric, as if to wipe away the sweat. “Not every family is the same.”

He got what he wanted anyway. He must admit he’s rather enjoying his occasional talks with his *lover*.

And maybe Jeongguk enjoys them a little more than he should.

13.

He finds himself staring at the doors to Jeongguk's chambers again later that week, after he noticed the alpha was missing from an important dinner with the Court. He knew his rut must have kicked in, and he also knew nobody was helping him get through it. Ruts tend to be a little rougher to live through compared to heats, that's why it's customary for alphas to spend them with at least a few willing omegas—or a single one, if the alpha is mated.

Jeongguk isn't mated *and* isn't spending his ruts with anybody. He knows how it looks like to the members of the Court. Jimin usually came back to his chambers reeking of smoke whenever the Emperor had his rut, because it was the proper thing to do, his duty. He knew the Emperor could count on the help of a dozen or so omegas willing to share his bed, and his visits were usually very brief and to the point.

Jeongguk isn't his husband, but everyone knows him as his lover. It's tradition for the Emperor or Empress and their Consorts to keep official lovers in the palace, and they're *also* expected to attend to their needs—or at least show they care.

For a lover who isn't cared for by the Consort is a lover the Consort doesn't really need—and that means he has to go. And the Emperor has very creative views when it comes to making people disappear from the palace.

Being seen visiting Jeongguk in a time such as this is the logical thing to do. At least some of the rumors will quiet down, and maybe the Emperor will stop glowering at them every time they enter a room together, ten feet apart from each other.

So he knocks, his knuckles rattling loudly against the wood, and pushes the doors open before he hears an answer.

He was prepared to see anything—*anything*, and he also expected to: Jeongguk's scent was so strong he could smell it from behind the doors. So he isn't surprised in the least when the first thing he sees upon entering the room is a half-naked Jeongguk, sweat glistening on his back and arms, watching himself tugging at his cock in the mirror above his dresser.

They lock eyes in the mirror for a fraction of a second, then Jeongguk *yelps* and jumps back, frantically tucking himself back in his pants.

"I brought you some books," Jimin declares, closing the door behind him. He walks inside the bedchamber and places the books he brought with him on the coffee table, in the center of the room. "They're all for beginners, nothing too fancy. I thought you would like some distractions while you're in your... state."

His gaze slides down the planes of Jeongguk's chest to his crotch. His pants do nothing to hide the alpha's very evident arousal—neither does his scent.

Jeongguk huffs out a breathless chuckle. He seems to have gotten over the Consort barging in his bedroom rather quickly, or maybe he's just gotten used to Emperors and Consorts doing whatever they want around him.

“Books can’t distract me.”

“Why not?” Jimin asks, taking a seat on the armchair next to the lit fireplace. “Learning new things always makes for a good distraction. It challenges the intellect, thus taking your mind off things.”

“Ruts aren’t about intellect. They’re about instinct.”

He hasn’t failed to notice that Jeongguk isn’t calling him *Your Grace*. He’s also not adding it after he finishes speaking, as the alpha tends to do at times. Jimin wonders if it’s just an oversight on his part, or if his *instincts* told him to drop the title.

“And what is your instinct telling you to do?”

He knows he’s toeing a fine line between polite, casual conversation and unabashed flirting, and he also knows he hasn’t given the alpha the means to recognize what it is that he’s actually trying to do. Jimin is donning the usual mask of poise he’s known to wear everywhere in the palace.

In return, he sees the mask on Jeongguk’s face splinter at the edges. The alpha turns around before he sees it clatter to the ground, broken, useless—finally revealing who’s underneath.

“I learned to tame my instincts a long time ago. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“You’d think the Emperor would have picked a more instinctual alpha to take care of my omega needs,” Jimin answers readily, offering Jeongguk a teasing smile when the alpha turns to stare at him. “Taming one’s instincts... I didn’t know it was common for lower-class alphas to know how to tame their instincts. The nobility sees you as wild and uncouth, always chasing after omegas in the hopes to get your knot wet.”

“Are you sure you’re not describing the alphas of the Court, Your Grace?”

Jimin ponders over the question for a while, then rises to his feet. He walks up to Jeongguk, who’s been standing near the dresser all this time, reluctant to get close.

“Then maybe you’re more alike than the Court thinks.”

Jeongguk’s whole body stiffens when Jimin stops in front of him. He can see the quiet battle waging in his head—the need to pull back and put as much distance between them, and the yearning for touch, for the warmth of skin on skin. Jimin’s heat has passed, but with Jeongguk’s senses sharpened by the rut he knows the alpha can smell everything in his scent.

“You could have spent your rut away from the palace. Picked a town with a nice brothel, had a pretty omega with a painted face tend to your every need. You could have told the Emperor you were visiting a relative. Why are you still here?”

Jeongguk smiles faintly. “Maybe I like the comforts of the palace.”

“Your allowance is enough that you could rent an *entire* brothel for a few nights.”

“I don’t want to rent a brothel,” Jeongguk says, smile turning strained.

“Your preferences are rather unusual for a simple farmer.”

“*Your* preferences are unusual for someone of your status, Your Grace,” Jeongguk teases back. “You haven’t partaken in one orgy since your arrival in the palace. I find that highly suspicious.”

“I could have you punished for what you just said to me.”

“A pretty good impression of the classic Empire ruler, Your Grace.” Jeongguk’s eyes gleam at getting Jimin riled up. “Punishments and threats, they’re *keys* around these parts. Reward your subjects and they might stab you in the back the morning after, but send them to the royal torturer and they’ll fear you forever.”

Jimin stares deep into the alpha’s eyes. “I disagree. I think occasional rewards go a long way towards gaining a subject’s trust.”

He lifts his right hand as he says the last words. The flared sleeve of his robe slides down his arm, baring smooth skin. He offers the alpha his wrist, knowing his scent is much stronger there.

Jeongguk looks at it in confusion, then recognition, then bewilderment. His eyes cut to Jimin’s, and they’re so wide one could fit the sun and the moon in them.

“Your Grace, you don’t need to—”

“A reward,” Jimin says, “For what you did for me the night of the banquet.”

“I hit the Emperor in the head. I committed *treason*.”

“Yes,” Jimin says, unperturbed. “But not against me.”

Jeongguk pulls his bottom lip in his mouth, sucking on it with a torn expression. Jimin doesn’t lower his wrist.

“I remember reading in a book that sometimes, breathing in the scent of an omega who recently had his heat is enough to quench the flames of even the strongest ruts.”

“Those are really inappropriate books you’re reading, Your Grace.”

“I decide what’s inappropriate,” Jimin declares. He brings his wrist to Jeongguk’s nose in a silent, but stern invite.

He sees the exact moment Jeongguk’s determination breaks, and it smells sweet. The alpha’s scent intensifies when he takes his wrist—gently, as though his arm was made of glass—and nuzzles against the skin.

The low rumble that resonates through the alpha’s chest is a desperate, needy one. Jimin stays perfectly still, wrist trapped in Jeongguk’s now steely hold. He watches as the alpha drags his

nose across his forearm, trailing after the blueish veins webbed just underneath the skin. He pulls the hand up to his face, and Jimin's fingers splay over the alpha's cheek, cupping it.

Jimin does nothing else. He just stares quietly as Jeongguk inhales deeply, his eyes fluttering closed like the wings of a butterfly. His scent has grown impossibly stronger, enveloping the two of them in dense undergrowth where even the suns of this Court don't shine—it's dark, and thick, and thorny.

Jeongguk's other hand disappears down, and his lips part suddenly in a silent moan.

Jimin doesn't follow the trajectory of Jeongguk's hand—he doesn't need to. He keeps his eyes trained on the alpha's face, stoic as always. What he *sees* at the edge of his vision are the muscles in Jeongguk's arm working fast, the sweat glistening as Jeongguk's amber skin catches the light of the lamps.

Jeongguk's whole body spasms, and he buries his nose in Jimin's hand with a strangled moan. His breathing is haggard. His chest rises and falls slowly now, and the dense smell of bark and damp leaves hangs heavy in the air.

A pine grove all around them, no sky visible through the canopy, no exit in sight.

Jimin draws his hand back. Jeongguk follows it with lidded eyes, but doesn't stop him.

"I hope your pain has lessened a little."

He walks out of Jeongguk's bedchamber without looking back.

14.

Being allowed in one of the Emperor's war meetings should be considered an honor. To Jimin, it's just another occasion to witness his husband's ineptitude in war.

The alphas standing around the war table are mostly big, burly, and smell of sweat—except for Commander General Kim Namjoon, who somehow manages to retain his dignity despite being locked in this room with the Emperor for well over two hours already.

They've been discussing about the right strategy to eliminate two of the biggest threats in the enemy's army all evening, and Jimin has half a mind to pour the remaining bottle of wine over the map to put a stop on this madness.

He's about to accidentally spill his wine when the doors are pushed open by one of the white-gloved butlers and in comes Jeongguk, carrying a tray with more bottles of wine perched on top. He smiles at Jimin when he spots him, and walks over to his side of the table to place the tray next to him.

"What are you doing? You're not a servant."

"I offered to bring refreshments, Your Grace. I was growing bored of trying to eavesdrop in the corridor." He winks at Jimin, taking a seat next to him. "The guards at the door were about to drag me out of the palace."

"You should have let them. This meeting is a disaster."

"So, how do we win the war?"

"We don't." Jimin nods to the Emperor, who's currently busy amassing the bulk of his forces in a single point of the map that has absolutely no cover and plenty of chances for an ambush. "As long as he's allowed to speak in these meetings, we don't."

"Ah, more wine! Excellent," the Emperor booms, grabbing a new bottle and opening it swiftly. He pours the red liquid in both his chalice and Commander Namjoon's, grinning. "And that's how you win a war, gentlemen!"

The men all look at each other, confused. No one dares speak up against the Emperor.

"Your Majesty," Namjoon starts, hesitant. "If we bring all of our forces *here*, we will be slaughtered—"

"We have double their men, General. I take it math isn't your strongest suit?"

Commander Namjoon purses his lips. "They have the *high ground*, Your Majesty."

"Then drag them down!"

Jimin puts his chalice down with a little more force than what decency asks of omegas. “If I may speak, Your Majesty. Perhaps a fresh point of view might help you find a more efficient solution to the problem.”

The Emperor shoots him a condescending smile. “My dear. I know it isn’t unusual in the North for omegas to talk strategies, but *here...*” His smile turns almost kind, as if he were talking to a favorite nephew. “You know what? Today you look exceptionally radiant, my diamond. I’ll indulge you.”

He sits down and waits for Jimin to speak.

Jimin stands up to get a better view of the battle map. He holds back a grimace when he realizes just how many troops the Emperor means to send to their death.

“Everyone in this room knows how passionate the Emperor is about this war,” he starts off, looking at the officials gathered round the table. “How fiercely he wants to win back lands that rightfully belong to the Empire. That much is clear—he wants to win.”

He walks over to the cluster of miniature troops his husband amassed in one point of the map.

“I think we all agree that when it comes to battle tactics, the Emperor is unmatched.”

He notices Commander Namjoon quirk a skeptic eyebrow.

“Of course, *tactics* are important. Winning *battles* is important. The Emperor is very good at that, as he demonstrated with his victory in the battle of the Chionthar River a couple weeks ago.”

“Thank you, my dear, your compliments are much appreciated,” the Emperor says, pleased. He looks positively thrilled to hear so many praises coming from him.

Jimin picks up one of the miniatures, inspecting it with bored indifference. The toy soldier has a nondescript expression painted on its face, nothing like the emptiness he saw festering behind the eyes of the soldiers at the banquet.

Jimin smiles. “*Strategy*, though, is something that can elude even the brightest of minds.”

A few alphas shift uncomfortably, shuffling on their feet.

“Strategy?” The Emperor frowns.

“Strategy. Engaging in battles to gain the upper hand in a *war*.”

“I know what strategy means,” he snaps, annoyed.

“Of course.”

Jimin sweeps a handful of toy soldiers in his hand and walks over to the other side of the map. The officials all stare in various states of confusion as he arranges the troops around a strategic point.

“The river delta of Yonar. We send the infantry to the river to engage their troops, let them believe we are sending the bulk of our forces after them. Heavily armored infantry *can* and *will* form a blockade against the enemy forces, effectively trapping them here.”

He takes another two handful of figurines and moves to another part of the map.

“The Castle of Everfall.”

He arranges the toy soldiers in the woods near the image of a castle.

“The enemy took it from us years ago and it has, since then, become a well-defended stronghold. But half of their army will be busy fighting against our men in the delta. So, we send scouts ahead to kill any sentinels that might alert the stronghold of our approach, then send a few hundred men ahead to lure them into open confrontation. Having not been alerted of the bulk of our cavalry hiding in the woods here,” he points to the figurines hiding in the woods, “—they’ll take the bait and come out of hiding.”

He pushes the rest of the figurines closer to the castle.

“Then we go all in with the rest of the cavalry. They won’t be receiving reinforcements, and if we’re lucky, our scouts will spot and shoot any raven they see carrying messages from the castle.”

Silence falls around the war table. Jimin raises his eyebrows at a stunned Commander Namjoon before curtsying politely – it comes off as a mockery, which in part is—and walking back to his chair. Jeongguk stares at him with curious intensity, but stays quiet.

“Well,” Namjoon clears his throat, nervous. “Your Majesty, I think you made a wise choice marrying the Diamond of the North.”

“No doubt the Consort learned everything he knows from you, my liege,” another general adds, quick to dilute Namjoon’s compliment with more praise for the Emperor.

The Emperor stares at the map with an expression halfway between surprise and annoyance.

“Well. He, uhm—he certainly did.” He laughs and smacks his leg, and suddenly the tension around the table lifts. “My dear, how come you never told me you liked playing war in your free time? You’re much more interesting to look at when you talk about sending men to their deaths.”

Jimin’s smile is strained. “Should we use this particular strategy, we’ll save the lives of many of our soldiers.”

“Maybe they don’t call you Diamond of the North only for your beauty, dear.” The Emperor leans forward and takes Jimin’s hand in his. He kisses it softly, glinting eyes glued to Jimin’s. “You have a sharp, beautiful mind as well. I may visit you tonight, Your Grace. Tell your little alpha to take a stroll in the gardens after dinner.”

Jimin shivers. The smile on his face doesn’t waver as the smell of burnt wood takes over his own.

15.

The birthday of the Emperor's favorite lackey – and thus, best friend – Kim Taehyung falls on a day where the clouds hang heavy over the palace. The promise of rain smells sweet in the air, and Jimin's usual promenade in the royal gardens has lasted longer than usual for this exact reason.

The party the Emperor has thrown in Taehyung's honor takes place in one of the bigger halls. All of his favorite dishes have been prepared, along with the Emperor's, of course, and fountains of wine and champagne have been positioned in the middle of the ballroom.

"Will all that wine go to waste?" Jeongguk asks absent-mindedly, plucking grapes from a bunch and popping them in his mouth as he stares at the nobles trying to drink straight from the fountain.

"Would you like to drink the wine that spills from their mouths?"

"No, but you could have what's left sent over to the servant's quarters. Let them have a little fun."

Jimin clicks his tongue. "And have them drunkenly stumble all over the palace? The Emperor will have their heads."

"Ah, you're right. Somehow, the Emperor and his fondness for severed heads slipped my mind."

"I'd do it if the Emperor had a milder disposition."

"Like yours, Your Grace?" Jeongguk asks. He puts a grape in between his teeth, but doesn't bite. Jimin's gaze lingers on the alpha's lips closing in on the grape before flitting up again.

"You think I'm mild?"

"Not at all."

"What am I, then?"

Jeongguk chews slowly, pensive. "You can be kind and considerate. But you don't like people thinking of you as *mild*."

"What a skilled judge of character you are."

"You're certainly intense. You're the Diamond of the North, after all—sharp edges everywhere, beautiful, and harder than any steel."

"Steel is harder than diamond," Jimin says, unfazed.

“Your Majesty, you should learn to accept compliments when they come from the heart.” Jeongguk’s smile reaches his eyes, and they twinkle like the stars that can’t be found in the night’s overcast sky. “Plus, I’m just a farmer’s son. I don’t know such things.”

Jimin doesn’t let anything slip from his expression. He sighs, drumming his fingers on the table. “How goes your studying?”

“Really well, Your Grace. I now know how to spell my name.”

“Do you? I bet you have beautiful handwriting already.”

“I shall write you a letter as soon as I master the art of writing full sentences.”

Jimin turns around to hide his smile. He sees a servant carrying a basket full of peaches walking in his direction.

“Your Grace, these are a gift from the Emperor. They’re the first of the season.”

“Such a caring husband,” Jeongguk hums.

“Give the Emperor my thanks,” Jimin says. The servant bows and sets the basket on the table, near the other fruits.

“I do like peaches,” Jimin concedes, picking the roundest and smoothest of the bunch. They’re all perfect, not a bruise on their skin, smooth and of a delightful light pinkish-orange color that reminds him of the timid sunsets of Northrend.

He brings the peach to his nose, inhaling the scent. Lightly sweet, yet fragrant.

“I don’t think anyone who’s ever been in your presence can say they don’t like peaches, Your Grace.”

Jimin sets it down on his plate for later. Rain and peaches—perhaps tonight won’t be as bad as the others.

“What do *you* like, Jeongguk?” Jimin asks, turning to face the alpha in full. “Aside from flattering the Royal Consort, that is.”

“As a matter of fact, Your Grace, I *did* quite like peaches way before meeting you.”

Jeongguk steals the peach from his plate and inspects it. “Although the ones I used to eat were usually bruised or a little overripe. This one is perfect.” He meets Jimin’s eyes and says, voice lowering, “I wonder if it tastes as good as it looks.”

And he takes a bite.

Jimin’s breath hitches, an involuntary reaction that he hopes the alpha failed to notice. He watches Jeongguk’s teeth dig into the fruit, tearing into its heart almost ravenously. Juice stains his lips as he swallows, trickles down his chin. Their eyes are still locked, and Jimin still holds his breath.

“That was my peach.”

Jeongguk lifts the peach between them. “Come taste it, then.”

The music and chattering of the hall turn into meaningless background noise when Jimin slowly leans in—not to take a bite out of the peach the alpha is so arrogantly offering him, but to lick up Jeongguk’s lips.

He tastes juice on the tip of his tongue, tangy and sweet. He opens his eyes to see a stunned Jeongguk stare back at him a breath away from his face, but the alpha is quick to adjust.

He trails after his mouth, but Jimin rests two fingers on the alpha’s lips and pushes him back.

“I didn’t say you could kiss me back.”

Jeongguk freezes, to the point Jimin doubts he’s breathing at all. Jimin faintly hears a low murmur sweep the hall, but his vision has tunneled, and Jeongguk’s lips taste like the sweetest of peaches.

He’s thrilled.

Jimin’s fingers slide to Jeongguk’s chin and force his mouth open, although Jeongguk gives in quite willingly. He swipes his tongue over Jeongguk’s plusher lower lip, testing the waters. Through the cotton in his ears, Jimin hears the alpha’s breath catch in his throat, and he knows Jeongguk doesn’t dare move an inch.

He licks up Jeongguk’s lips with the tip of his tongue again, and again, and again, until the taste of peaches is no more. He kisses his bottom lip softly, pulling it into his own mouth and sucking gently. He does the same to his upper lip, tongue darting out to trace over the bow of his lip.

He never kisses Jeongguk square in the mouth, and his tongue never pushes past the alpha’s lips. He doesn’t *kiss* Jeongguk and he doesn’t let Jeongguk kiss *back*, and then he draws back and time catches up to him again.

“Don’t take what’s mine,” Jimin warns him, then stands up among the whispers of the Court and walks out of the hall.

16.

“The Court seemed to have enjoyed your show immensely last night, Jimin.”

“What show?” Jimin asks distractedly, standing still in the center of his bedroom as Ken helps him undress.

“You know. When you kissed Jeongguk in front of the whole Court?” Yoongi says, amused. “At Taehyung’s birthday party?”

“It wasn’t exactly a kiss.”

“Doesn’t matter if you held his face still to spit in his mouth, Jimin, that was quite a show you two put on.”

“You told me to give the Court what they crave most,” Jimin says, annoyed. “I did. I gave them something to gossip about for *weeks*.”

Yoongi snorts. “If you think a kiss will keep them occupied for weeks, I have bad news for you.”

“What else do they *want* from me?”

“More. They’ll always want more. They recently found out you’re made of flesh and blood like everyone else, and now they’re eager to see more.”

“What are you saying?”

“Bets are going around about the size of your *lover*’s knot. I’m afraid you’ll have to let them take a peek soon, if you don’t want someone to assault Jeongguk in a dark hallway at night.”

“They wouldn’t dare,” Jimin mutters, doubting his own words. “They know he’s *mine*.”

“Anything to keep the entertainment going,” Yoongi says darkly.

“I won’t let Jeongguk parade around the palace naked,” he shoots back, annoyance weaved into the words.

“There’s other ways you could show him off.”

Jimin shrugs on his night robe and goes to sit in the armchair opposite Yoongi’s. He dismisses Ken with a wave of his hand.

“He’s not some exotic animal to be put on display for the amusement of the Court.”

“Turns out he is,” Yoongi says, shrugging. “Listen, Jimin. Jeongguk is eager to please. He’s just a simpleton who got lucky because he’s got a really big dick, and because word reached his village that the Emperor needed one badly. His body is really all he’s got going on for him, and I *assure* you he is happy to show it off.”

Jimin rubs his temples, feeling the beginning of a headache pulsate behind his left eye.

“You really think he’s just some farmer from a godforsaken village?”

“Of course he is. Look at the guy, he’s all brawn and no brains.”

“I think he’s pretty clever, actually.”

Yoongi’s eyebrows shoot up. “Are you catching feelings for your toy alpha?”

Jimin laughs. “Diamonds don’t have feelings, remember?”

“You very much have them. And plenty too,” Yoongi says. His eyes have softened, as well as his voice. “You just don’t want it to be known. It’s your best kept secret.”

“People manipulate feelings all the time. I merely want to protect mine.”

Yoongi gets up from the armchair with a sigh.

“Before I go, there’s something else I wanted to remind you. Seokjin is coming to visit all the way from the Republic. The situation between their government and the Emperor is a bit tense, so I hope they’ll be able to come to a pacific agreement. He’s expected to cross the border next week.”

Jimin perks up. “Seokjin? How’d you manage to get in contact with him?”

“I’m not going to lie, he was hard to track. I won’t pretend to understand what his job in the Republic entails, because I honestly have no idea, and he has never offered an explanation. Maybe you’ll have better luck when you see him—you’ve always been his favorite cousin, after all.”

And with that, Yoongi bows and leaves the room, leaving Jimin contemplating the dying embers in the fireplace.

It should smell like burnt wood and ash, but tonight his nostrils are filled with the scents of what he once called his home.

17.

It all starts with a seemingly naïve question: *shall we breakfast near the lake?* And suddenly Jeongguk is smiling wide and following him down the numerous staircases of the palace like an overexcited puppy.

The breakfast is a simple one—fruit, croissants, lemon pies, some meat. Two maidservants pour them milk and coffee, then retreat under the shadow of the great willow tree at the foot of the lake.

Jimin also sits in the shade, albeit at the very edge of it. The grass is probably going to stain his robes, but he doesn't mind as much as he should. He watches Jeongguk sitting cross-legged in front of him, basking in the warm sunlight of the morning. He has his eyes closed, and for a moment Jimin wishes Jeongguk would keep them open, stare right into the sun so he could see how it shattered into a hundred different shards of golden amidst the brown.

Silly. A silly thought, one he shakes away as soon as it crosses his mind. Of course he doesn't want Jeongguk to stare at the sun—he'd go blind. His eyes would fog over, and they would never catch the sunlight again.

"Why did you take me here?" Jeongguk asks, eyes still closed, leaning back on his hands. His face is tilted back toward the sun, and the spring breeze plays with his hair.

"Can't I have some private time with the one who is supposed to be my lover?"

"Private?" Jeongguk laughs. He opens one eye to glance at the nobles promenading near the lake, some distance away. "You picked one of the most popular spots in the palace gardens to have breakfast."

"Then perhaps I want everybody to see us," Jimin says, breaking off the tip of a croissant.

"Are you scheming something, Your Grace?"

"I'm not one for schemes."

"Aren't you?"

Jimin looks back at the alpha. "Are you?"

Jeongguk shakes his head, smiling. "A little bird once told me I'm only good for pleasuring omegas."

"Was that Yoongi?" Jimin asks, frowning. "Did he say that to you?"

"I don't mind. It's true. I was hired to make *you* happy, after all." He sits up, shaking his hands of the soil and grass that stuck to his palms. "Although I admit I have a hard time figuring out if I'm being successful or not."

“I don’t think of you as just a body, Jeongguk.”

“Well, that’s what I am. Just a body. A real nice one, if I say so myself.” He jumps to his feet, glances over his shoulder at a group of nobles chattering at the edge of the lake. “Eye candy for the Court. Shall we give them something nice to look at, Your Grace?”

Jimin looks up at the alpha, eyes narrowed. “What are you doing?”

“They’ve been nicer to you lately. I think they deserve a little reward from the Consort, don’t you agree?”

He smirks as he shrugs off his shirt lightning-quick. It falls on the grass, quickly followed by pants and underwear. Jeongguk undresses with a confidence typical of strong, young alphas, those who know they’ve been blessed with good proportions and a nice face to look at. Jimin wonders if Jeongguk has always been treated as eye candy, wherever he lived before coming to the palace—but the thought lasts but a moment before it sinks to the bottom of his mind. He stares dumbly after Jeongguk as the alpha proudly strides toward the lake, dressed only in the lascivious looks of the members of the Court strolling by.

He walks into the waters and dives almost immediately once the water reaches his waist. Jimin knows the lake must be cold this early in the morning, frigid, even. Yet it doesn’t seem to matter to the alpha, who reemerges after a few beats with what looks like a big smile on his face.

Jimin waves one of the servants over. He orders her to have a robe being brought from the palace and waits for Jeongguk to finish his unexpected morning swim.

I guess Yoongi will be satisfied, now.

He looks at the nobles now more or less openly staring at Jeongguk swimming in the lake. There’s a flock of omegas who are fanning themselves with their elaborate, foreign-made fans and stare at the alpha as if he were a particularly succulent fruit. A couple of alphas dressed in the long robes of the clergy watch in quiet disapproval, but they’re rarely impressed by what they see in the Court. The servants scurrying around the gardens try to sneak a couple glances too, in between the various tasks they’ve been assigned.

Jimin rearranges his robes around his legs, smoothening the creases and plucking stray strands of grass who got stuck to the silk. It doesn’t feel right—it’s an uncomfortable feeling, this one which sneaks its way down Jimin’s spine. He doesn’t like to treat Jeongguk like he’s a circus attraction. The alpha might enjoy the attention, might even find it flattering, empowering—but it leaves a bitter taste in Jimin’s mouth, one he can’t seem to swallow down.

This elaborate game of pretend, is it really worth it in the end?

“Your Grace! What a marvelous morning to breakfast at the lake, isn’t it?”

A few omegas have detached from the group and walked over, their colorful fans still wide open to shield their face from the sun.

“Indeed.” Jimin smiles graciously. “We’ve been blessed with wonderful weather. Are you enjoying your walk around the gardens?”

“Oh, *so* much. The roses are all in full bloom, although it is the scent of *pine* what’s strongest in the air today.”

They laugh in unison behind their fans, sneaking glances toward the lake.

“I wouldn’t recommend getting too close to the pine trees,” Jimin says sweetly. “Pine processionaries have nested in several of the trees’ branches, I’ve been told. They’re nasty little caterpillars, highly irritating to the skin.”

The warning seems to fly straight over their heads.

“Tell us, Your Grace—is it true he can last *all night long*?”

“I’ve heard his knot is one of the *biggest* in the Empire.”

A gasp. “Your Grace, that must be so painful!”

“I’m *so* jealous, Your Grace.”

“Is it true you had to commission a new set of sheets because he tore them all to *shreds*?”

Jimin listens quietly to the barrage of questions, then raises a hand. They all fall silent.

“Don’t be daft, lady Rhee. The palace has an overabundance of silk sheets, there’s absolutely no need for me to commission more.”

He hears a squeal followed by a shushing and a giggle, and Jimin already knows what triggered them without looking. Beyond the omegas of the Court, he glimpses a very naked, very wet Jeongguk emerging from the lake.

“He’s so dreamy,” he hears one of the younger omegas sigh. Her friend elbows her in the side, but this one’s eyes are also glued to the alpha’s skin glistening under the sun.

“My lords and ladies,” Jeongguk greets them mischievously, walking closer. He has no shame whatsoever, and he also doesn’t seem affected in the least by the various scorching gazes dissecting every inch of his naked skin.

Jimin holds back an eye roll. He’s almost tempted to offer some of the omegas a handkerchief to dab their chin with—they look like they’ve never seen a cock before. And in the Court of Suns, it’s saying *a lot*.

“I had them bring you a robe,” Jimin says, affecting nonchalance. Jeongguk takes the robe with a smile, then proceeds to rub his hair with it.

Once he’s done, he discards the robe near the base of the tree and goes to sit at Jimin’s side—much closer than he was before.

“That wasn’t for—”

“You should join me next time, Your Grace,” Jeongguk whispers in his ear, suddenly paying no mind to the omegas gathered around. “Why have such a beautiful lake if you don’t make use of it?”

“It’s too cold,” comes Jimin’s stilted reply.

The alpha’s presence at his side is solid and warm despite the sheen of cold water on his amber skin. Jimin’s senses seem to have suddenly sharpened to the point that he can *feel* the warmth emanating off the alpha’s body in waves, *hear* the droplets of water falling down the tip of his hair down to his chest. He remains still under Jeongguk’s featherlight touch—the alpha has started dragging his fingers up the column of Jimin’s neck, nosing at the scent glands just below his ear.

“We can hold each other tight if it’s too cold for you.”

He knows what he’s doing—giving the omegas something to talk about for the rest of the day. His lips trail up to Jimin’s jaw, igniting his skin.

Jimin puts a hand on Jeongguk’s chest. A single warning.

He hears the murmurs of the other omegas as if from a great distance, even though they’re right there, in front of his eyes, staring, observing, ready to catch the Royal Consort slipping. He thinks about ordering Jeongguk to stop acting so shamelessly. His lips are about to form the words, but his voice is lost.

He decides to play Jeongguk’s game for a while longer.

The hand resting on Jeongguk’s chest flies up to curl around his neck and bring him closer. He lets Jeongguk kiss him this time—lips and tongue and teeth as well, a bit. He allows him to take control of the kiss, parting his lips to let the alpha have a taste of his mouth for the first time.

The omegas all gasp and giggle and fan themselves, flustered by the visual, dizzy with the scent of musk and pine—Jeongguk’s scent has turned unmistakably more pungent. When Jimin breaks off the kiss, it’s to watch the noble omegas hastily muttering their goodbyes and making a beeline toward the palace.

This will make them happy for a while.

The thought had barely formed in his mind that Jeongguk pushes him down, suddenly straddling him against the grass.

Not a sound escapes Jimin’s lips, not a protest, not a single annoyed sound or word of reproach. He just stares up at Jeongguk’s face, brows knitted in a frown. The two maidservant that were attending them seem to have vanished. They left discreetly with the rest of the omegas, giving them the privacy they thought they’d need.

“You’re hard,” Jimin says, detached, feeling the weight of Jeongguk’s cock against his stomach when the alpha dips down to bracket his face between his strong arms.

“You can tell, Your Grace?”

He’s teasing him. Jeongguk shamelessly starts rolling his hips against him, making sure he feels the full extent of his arousal.

“Your scent. It changes when you’re aroused.”

“Very perceptive, Your Grace.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Jimin continues, voice airier than usual. “I’ve made it clear that I won’t lie with you.”

Jeongguk’s body engulfs him completely, and his robes are starting to get wet. Tiny droplets of water fall on Jimin’s skin, trickling down his neck, his cheeks, like a light November rain. Viscous resin in his nostrils, sticky and vaguely sweet. Dew. He closes his eyes. He opens them. These woods are too dense for him to find his way out.

Jeongguk glances up, toward the palace. “They’re still watching. I know what I’m doing.”

“You want to fuck me in front of everyone?” Jimin asks, raising an eyebrow. He grabs Jeongguk’s arm—a warning, for now. “I’m the Royal Consort, not a Court whore.”

“*Your* Court is all about open sexuality,” Jeongguk remarks, dipping his head down to say the words a breath away from Jimin’s mouth. “Your Grace. Haven’t you noticed already?”

“Is this a rite of initiation? I’m not truly a member of the Court if I don’t have sex while everyone watches?”

Jeongguk chuckles. “Kind of.”

“I wonder if my father knew he was sending his son into a den of depraved wolves.”

“Everyone knows about the vices and sins of the Court of Suns, Your Grace. We’re infamous like that.”

Jeongguk shifts over him, repositioning between his legs. He bunches Jimin’s robes up to his sides, baring his legs.

He shouldn’t have worn such loose robes—they’re too easy to lift up. The thought dissolves when he feels the pad of Jeongguk’s fingers skid up his thigh, cold and hot at the same time.

“Wrap your arms around me,” Jeongguk says, mouthing at the skin of his neck.

“They won’t believe it.”

“I’m a very good actor.”

You're not acting, he almost says, but he swallows back the words. Jeongguk's scent has grown so strong that Jimin wishes he could hold his breath forever, locking him out of his lungs. Instead, he locks Jeongguk between his thighs and plays along.

"Then, act."

To anyone peeking from far away—up on the hill where the palace stands proudly or on the other side of the lake, where people are still taking their morning stroll—they might appear like any other couple fooling around: an alpha and an omega of the Court engaging in sexual intercourse at the foot of the lake, under the shade of a great willow tree. Jimin wonders how long it'll be for the rumors to spread around the palace—about the Royal Consort finally fucking his lover in front of everyone. Is he finally going to be seen as a real person now, someone with actual blood in his veins, and flesh that begs to be touched?

He clings to Jeongguk's back as the alpha starts grinding against him, slow but insistent. He cranes his neck to let Jeongguk scent him, and hears the alpha growl deep in his chest. His nuzzling turns into mouthing at his neck, then kissing, then biting. He knows it's smart to leave evident traces of their affair on his skin, but he can't help but feel a little anxious. He's going to go back to his chambers and see the proof of what Jeongguk has done—is doing—to him reflected back at him in the mirror. The thought that he's being marked by someone who isn't his rightful mate both upsets him and entices him.

"We should kiss again, Your Grace."

Jeongguk's voice is breathless and gravelly at the same time. His thrusts have become quicker and stronger, cock rubbing insistently against the silky fabric of his robes. They're probably ruined now, and he will have to throw them away. He wonders briefly what it would be like to feel Jeongguk's hard cock rub against his naked skin, instead of feeling it through layers and layers of cloth. Does he want to find out?

Should he?

He runs his fingers through Jeongguk's hair—they're curling at the sides now, still damp and slightly darker than usual—and kisses him again, deep and slow and with too much tongue towards the end. He feels Jeongguk moan like an alpha on his rut, his scent spike to new heights. His hips stutter.

Jimin snakes a hand between their bodies to grab the base of Jeongguk's cock. He can't help but gasp in their kiss—he's seen how big Jeongguk is, of course, *glimpsed* it because he always refused to *look* properly, but *touching* him brings forth a wave of new, undiscovered feelings he's not sure how to process.

His cock feels nice in Jimin's hand, thick and warm and so very hard, his fingers barely managing to wrap around the shaft. He feels Jeongguk twitch and hears him grunt right next to his ear, soon to his climax. Jimin squeezes the base to stem the flow of blood, and Jeongguk whines like a kicked puppy.

"You're not coming all over me, alpha."

Jeongguk's whole body tenses like a bowstring. His muscles strain, and his cock throbs painfully against his fingers. Jimin tames the urge to stroke his hand up and down Jeongguk's shaft and squeezes harder.

"Rein it in. I think you did enough."

He watches as Jeongguk reluctantly climbs down his lost high. He's panting, and his cheeks are flushed a pretty pink. His hips stutter to a halt.

Instead of looking annoyed, Jeongguk smirks. "Your scent has changed, too. Your Grace."

"It has not."

"It most definitely has." One of Jeongguk's hands disappears down, between their bodies. "Let me."

Jimin stares up at him coldly.

"You can go, Jeongguk."

"But, Your Grace—"

"You're dismissed."

Jeongguk gets up, defeated. He grabs his clothes and shrugs them on quickly, before anyone nearby has the time to get closer and realize the Consort's lover is still hard as a rock.

Jimin pulls his robes down to cover himself. He stares at their half-eaten breakfast as Jeongguk heads back to the palace, alone.

He sighs and falls back against the grass. He spends a few minutes staring at the canopy of the willow tree, with the sun filtering through the cascading branches all around him—a green dome of peace and quiet.

At least with his robes, hiding his arousal will be easy.

18.

He's keeping an eye on Jeongguk from a safe distance when the Emperor walks into the sitting room, his usual escort plus Taehyung and his wife trailing after him like loyal dogs.

The nobles all turn to bow, while some omegas curtsy elegantly, winking at the Emperor. It's so easy to spot who among the omegas of the Court his husband has fucked, so easy it quickly stopped being a betting game between him and Yoongi. All it takes is one long look at their faces: this one *wants* to get fucked in the ass, this one has probably had both the Emperor *and* his best friend inside her, that one hopes to be fucked again soon before the Emperor forgets about his existence.

Boring.

The Emperor glides over to him and Yoongi, toothy smile plastered on his face like he just found out he won the war.

"Yoongi. My Diamond," he says pleasantly, kissing Jimin's hand like the world's most caring husband. "Splendid day, isn't it? Although, it's not as warm outside as it was yesterday—I wouldn't recommend a swim in the lake."

He laughs, followed by Taehyung and his wife.

"You put up quite a performance at the lake. I heard you even showed some *skin*. I almost didn't believe the rumors."

"I guess some of the Court's customs rubbed off on me."

"The North is so uptight. I'm astonished you managed to live a decent life there," Taehyung's wife, Sora, interjects. "I heard they let omegas wear pants. They're expected to work, have jobs—they even fight in wars, is what I've been told."

Taehyung puts a hand on her leg. "Don't be ridiculous, Sora. Omegas don't fight. You don't have the bone structure for it."

Years of exercising self-control come in handy now, as Jimin manages to hold back an eyeroll that would have dislodged his eyeballs from their sockets. He smiles affably and says, "Maybe Northern omegas are built differently. I've seen omegas in my father's army fight as fiercely as the strongest alphas."

The Emperor snorts. "So uncouth. Don't alphas get distracted by their scents? Our soldiers would be all over them in a heartbeat."

Jimin exchanges a single glance with Yoongi. It seems like his old friend is trying to completely disassociate from the conversation—he can't blame him. Yoongi is the first alpha in a family of omegas—except for his father. He'd grown up among omegas, and if there is anyone in the world who knows about how strong they can be, it is him.

“Mmh. Perhaps Northern alphas are also a different species, then.”

“More brains and less cock?” The Emperor snickers, slapping Taehyung’s shoulder as he laughs. “I’ve always thought alphas from the North have smaller dicks. It’s the cold, it shrinks their dicks to half the normal size.” He glances up at Yoongi, who’s standing rigidly next to Jimin’s chair. “No offense, Yoongi. It’s just how it is, one can’t control the weather.”

Sora smiles languidly up at Yoongi. “I don’t believe such rumors. I wouldn’t mind taking a look for myself.”

Taehyung frowns, but the Emperor beats him to it. “Sora, my dear, you wouldn’t feel a thing with a cock the size of a pinky finger inside you. I’ve spoiled you too much, I bet even your husband can’t satisfy you anymore.”

He explodes in a cackle. He looks around, expecting the others to laugh as well, but Jimin keeps his eyes trained on Taehyung to gauge his reaction.

The alpha forces out a dry chuckle, but it’s too short and shaky. The hand on his wife’s thigh clenches, turning possessive.

Somehow, Sora manages to smile graciously despite the bad joke at his husband’s expense. “I wonder if the Consort will be so gracious as to share her lover with a few select members of the Court, one day,” she says to Jimin, smiling.

Jimin sips his tea. It’s turned bitter, somehow.

“He’s not called the Consort’s *official lover* for no reason, Lady Kim,” Yoongi interjects, lifting an eyebrow.

“Ah, it’s just a title. I share my lovers all the time, don’t I, Taehyung?” The Emperor says, waving a hand dismissively at Yoongi. “You love to fuck my whores, right? A fine exchange for your wife.”

Taehyung’s smile is tight. “Yes, of course, Your Majesty.”

“That reminds me. There’s one Court whore who reminds me you of you, dear.” The Emperor pours himself some wine, then lifts the chalice to Jimin, as if to drink to his health. “He’s from Northrend as well. A little pig town right on the border, I think. He’s not as shiny as you, obviously, my sparkling Diamond. *And* he’s a little dull of mind, if I have to be honest. But boy, does he *scream* when I fuck him in the ass.” He laughs, bringing the glass to his lips to take a sip. “Must be because he grew up in a pig farm town. But that’s the difference between you two, my dear. He was born in a pigsty, you in a stone castle. He’s a screamer, you’re as silent as the hallways of your father’s castle. I hear you Northerners go in hibernation when it’s deep winter, is that true?”

Jimin regards him with cold indifference. “Was that supposed to be another one of your jokes, Your Majesty?” He looks around. “I don’t see anybody laughing. Might be because you forgot to give them their cue.”

He gets up before the Emperor absorbs the jab and does something stupid—like hurling the glass at his head, or something similar. He joins Jeongguk to the other side of the chamber, leaving Yoongi to pick up the pieces of his husband’s shattered ego.

“Has Lady Kim—Taehyung’s wife—ever hit on you?” he asks Jeongguk abruptly, pulling him away from the circle of alphas with which he was engaged in casual conversation.

“Uh—good evening to you as well, Your Grace,” Jeongguk replies, confused. “Is something the matter?”

“Just answer my question.”

“A couple times, when she found me alone.”

“Alone,” Jimin says slowly. “When she found you alone? Alone in the palace?”

“Or—or in the gardens, yeah.” Jeongguk’s frown smoothens out into an amused expression. “Are you jealous, Your Grace?”

“You can’t sleep with her. She’s the Emperor’s favorite.”

“I thought she was Taehyung’s wife.”

Jimin looks at him, long and hard. “Does that matter?”

“They *share* her?”

Jeongguk’s gaze shifts to find the Emperor, Taehyung and Sora.

“I thought she tagged along only because her husband is the Emperor’s oldest friend.”

Jimin pulls him further toward a corner of the chamber when he sees people trying to eavesdrop on their conversation, perhaps trying to catch some juicy details about their relationship—since it’s perfectly normal for the Court to discuss them in a social gathering, for everyone to hear, apparently.

“He likes her scent. Lilies and vetiver, he says he finds it refreshing.”

“So he brings her everywhere cause she’s a walking *potpourri*?”

“And I would guess she’s good in bed,” Jimin continues, staring at her from a safe distance. She’s laughing and drinking wine and trying very hard to cozy up to Yoongi, even under the eyes of the Emperor and his husband. Typical Court of Suns behavior—he’s not surprised anymore.

“Do you want me to find out if it’s true?”

Jimin looks back at the alpha, scowling. “Don’t get too close to Sora. I don’t know how jealous the Emperor is of her.”

“Oh, so you’re worried about me—is what you’re telling me,” Jeongguk says, grinning. He puts a hand over his heart. “Warms my heart, Your Grace.”

“I’m just looking out for you. I don’t want him to sentence you to death only because you fucked the wrong omega.”

“This is the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me, Your Grace. I should abstain from eating any more cake today to avoid going into shock.”

Jimin huffs. “You think you’re so witty, do you?”

“I think I am a lot of things, Your Grace.”

“Mmh. Such as?”

“Well, I’m funny, for starters. You said so yourself. I’m also very handsome.”

“The palace doesn’t lack for handsome alphas.”

“I’m good at conversing. Ask any of those gentlemen there and they’ll tell you.”

“That’s it?”

“I’m good at swimming. I think you know that already, Your Grace.” His eyes glimmer with mirth.

Jimin doesn’t break the eye contact. “Yes, that secret is out, I’m afraid.”

“And I’m really, really good in bed.” His fingers stroke the back of Jimin’s hand, light as a butterfly’s wings.

Jimin glances around the room. “Shall I ask for anyone else’s opinion to corroborate that claim?”

“You can try me out any time, Your Grace.”

Jimin looks back at the alpha. Jeongguk’s fingers have begun playing with his, almost interlacing together but never quite going for it.

“I know I can. You’re mine to do as I please.”

Jeongguk’s eyebrows shoot up. Perhaps he didn’t expect him to say something so bold.

“Touché.”

Jimin stifles his smile. “Anything else you think you’re good at?”

“I’m quite good at making a certain Diamond of the North smile.”

“A man of many talents. Hard to believe you’re from the deep countryside of the Empire.”

“We’re a talented people,” Jeongguk says. He looks beyond Jimin, toward the rest of the nobles dallying around. “It’s just that sometimes, our talents go to waste.”

Jimin tilts his head. “Do you think I’m wasting *your* talent away?”

Jeongguk’s eyes switch back to him. He smirks. “No. You’re just saving it for the right time.”

“That’s what you think? I’m *saving* it?” Jimin repeats, amused by Jeongguk’s brazenness.

“Like one does with a bottle of fine wine.”

Jimin watches the alpha lean against the wall. He looks good with the navy blue of the sitting room’s wallpaper at his back. Like he’s in a painting. “You’re saying you get progressively better in bed as time goes by?”

“You look really cute when you pretend not to *get* things, Your Grace.”

Jimin feels the tip of his ears burn. He whips his head around, away from the alpha against the blue wallpaper, away from smiling bronze eyes. He doesn’t remember anyone calling him *cute*, not since he was a child. He’s always been pretty, or handsome, or beautiful, or stunning—all adjectives fitting of the Diamond of the North. Not *cute*.

He’s *not* cute.

He takes one step forward and grabs Jeongguk’s head loosely by the hair, tilting his face to one side.

“Y—your Grace?”

He hears Jeongguk’s breath get caught up in his throat as he nuzzles the alpha’s neck, dragging the bridge of his nose along the skin. He smells pine needles and aromatic wood, the familiar vision of a forest in the winter blooming behind his eyelids. His tongue darts out to lick the spot below Jeongguk’s ear, where the alpha’s scent is stronger.

He takes his time to scent Jeongguk, making sure the scent of peaches blends nicely with that of his winter forest. He doesn’t realize Jeongguk is holding him by the waist until he pulls back, and the hand falls back to the alpha’s side, inert.

“Why’d you do that?”

“To play the game,” Jimin says, feeling the eyes of half the nobles fixed on them. “You’re also good at that, no?”

“The Emperor is watching,” Jeongguk whispers, rubbing the spot where Jimin scented him. Peach blossoms bloom in the air between them.

“Let him. He gifted you to me.” He wraps his arm around Jeongguk’s and pulls him toward the doors. “I’m tired. I think you should be seen walking me to my rooms, don’t you think?”

He enjoys the puzzled look on Jeongguk's face throughout the walk to his apartments, and wonders if Jeongguk still thinks of him as *cute*.

19.

Submerged up to his ears in the hot water of his bath, Jimin stares into empty space, recalling the sensation of Jeongguk's hands over his bare legs. It lasted but a moment, the flutter of a hummingbird's wings, but the burn his touch left behind is everlasting. Even water as hot as this can't seem to match the temperature of the fire Jeongguk seemed to have awakened in him.

He tilts his head back, feeling the cold metal of the bathtub against his neck. He ordered his servants to carry the tub in his bedchamber, so he could stare into the sliver of royal gardens visible from his window. He looks out without really seeing the horizon stretching infinitely over the grove of white-spangled magnolia trees just to the side of the lake where he let Jeongguk kiss him.

A sudden knock at his doors pulls him back from his reveries. He frowns, because nobody is permitted to visit him when he's taking a bath—unless it's his manservant, or the Emperor himself.

But the Emperor doesn't knock, and Ken's knocking is usually followed by a request to enter.

"Come in."

He sinks deeper into the bubbly water, confident his visitor won't be able to glimpse much through the foam.

"Your Grace. You weren't at breakfast this morning."

Jimin smells him before he hears him.

Jeongguk walks up to the bathtub with all the arrogance of an alpha who knows he won't be sent away for his impudence. His eyes don't sweep over the length of the tub, but they linger for a few seconds on Jimin's bare shoulders peeking out of the bath water.

"Ken didn't announce you," Jimin states, frowning. "And I felt like having breakfast in my rooms today."

"He's gone to fetch you some fresh robes. You could have called on me, Your Grace. I would have gladly kept you company," Jeongguk continues, crouching next to the tub. He rests his head on the cold edge, brown eyes boring into Jimin's. "You know I prefer your company to that of anyone else in the palace."

"You're not a courtier, Jeongguk. Your job isn't to entertain me with pleasant conversation," Jimin says for the hundredth time, shifting slightly to a more comfortable sitting position. His knees break the surface of the foamy water, and Jeongguk watches the water ripple for a moment.

"No? It seems to me like you've repurposed me for that very role, Your Grace."

“Who said I find conversing with you pleasant?”

Instead of answering, Jeongguk dips one hand in the water. First the tip of his fingers, then the knuckles, then the whole hand follows. He swirls it around a bit, playing with the bubbles.

“I’m here, aren’t I? You let me in.”

“I thought you were Ken.”

“Are you disappointed?”

The hand stills. The water is up to his wrist. Jimin watches it sink in a little deeper.

“I’m sorry for interrupting your bath, Your Grace.”

“I’m still having my bath, right?” Jimin points out, eyes glued to the submerged hand. It’s not moving, and it’s not touching him. It’s not *touching* him, it’s not doing *anything*—inert, still as a dead creature in the water. *Think of ugly things.*

“You stink,” Jimin says, blurting the first thing that crosses his mind. He smells horses and a hint of sweat buried under Jeongguk’s alpha scent.

Jeongguk laughs. “I went for a morning ride in the woods with the Emperor and his friends. They invited me, and I said yes.”

“Did he already ask you how many times you made me come so far?” Jimin asks, leaning back against the tub and forcing his body to relax. The hand has reprised its idle swirling, closer to his thigh this time. Under the water, Jimin presses his legs together.

“Hmm. He asked me if you make any sound in bed,” Jeongguk says, watching the bubbles pop slowly. “He wants to know how you sound like. Was very curious about it.”

“What did you tell him?”

Jeongguk cracks a lopsided smile. “I didn’t say anything. I don’t know how you sound like when you come, Your Grace.”

“You could have made something up,” Jimin retorts. “Used your imagination.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not sure what the Emperor would like to hear. If I tell him you’re exceptionally loud, he might take it as an offense against his virility. You never made a sound with him, did you?”

Jimin scoffs.

“And If I say you’re quiet, he might think I’m not as skilled a lover as he initially thought. And then he’d send me away, and where would I get the money to support my poor family back in the village?”

Jimin looks up at the alpha. He's not even trying to hide his teasing smile.

"Cute story. You still reek of horse sweat."

"Fine."

Jeongguk gets up and pulls his shirt off over his head. The fabric pools at his feet, quickly followed by the rest of his clothes.

Jimin doesn't say a word as Jeongguk climbs in the tub, joining him in the hot water. He sits on the opposite side with the same faint, teasing smile curling the corners of his lips.

"Better, Your Grace?"

"You'll stink up my bathwater," Jimin says, flicking water at him.

Jeongguk's foot brushes his calf, and he freezes. "Send me away, then."

Jimin pretends to think about it. "I don't want you to smell for the rest of the day, so you can stay."

"Most gracious of you, Your Grace."

"So, how did Taehyung look to you this morning?"

Jeongguk looks confused for a moment. "Taehyung? He looked fine to me."

"He didn't try to fake a hunting accident at the Emperor's expense on this fine day?"

The alpha stares at him in bewilderment.

"Don't look at me like I've grown two heads, Jeongguk. Haven't you seen Taehyung's face when he's around the Emperor lately?"

The alpha shrugs. "He hasn't been very chatty."

"He's not the talkative type, no. But he's always been that way," Jimin says. "There's something else. He's annoyed at the Emperor. Angry, even. He hides it well, when he remembers he's not the only person in a room."

Jeongguk sits up, his interest piqued. Jimin's gaze glides over the alpha's exposed chest. Water trickles down his pectorals—he's not built like the average farmer, that much is evident. He's bulkier and broader around the shoulders, and Jimin glimpses faint scars on the alpha's skin.

"Why?"

"Easy to guess. The Emperor fucks his wife on the daily. Lady Sora Kim. You've met her, she tried to get in your pants before," Jimin says offhandedly.

"Oh, her. Potpourri girl."

“I think he’s getting tired of it. He wants his wife all to himself—I genuinely think he’s in love with her. She’s not a bad person, only a little vapid.”

“But Taehyung is the Emperor’s best friend,” Jeongguk says slowly. “Everything he has—his position at court, his job, his life here—is thanks to him, right?”

“A man has his limits,” Jimin says, leaning in to prop his chin atop his knees. The water is getting a little colder, but he doesn’t mind. “I think Taehyung has long since reached them.”

“He’s the captain of the Emperor’s guards, right?” Jeongguk asks, pensive. His gaze is lost among the bubbles softly popping between them.

“His *personal* guard, yes. He has men stationed around the Emperor’s chambers at all times. Sometimes he stands guard, too. When he feels like showing off in his uniform.” Jimin gathers a bit of foam in the palm of his hands and blows on it. “He does look good in that uniform, I’ll give him that.”

Jeongguk breaks away from his thoughts and chuckles. “You fancy him, Your Grace?”

“I said he looks good. I didn’t say I want to invite him in my bed.”

“You better mean it, Your Grace. I might get jealous,” Jeongguk teases him.

Jimin feels an involuntary smile curl up one corner of his lips. “You can’t be jealous of someone who isn’t yours yet.”

“*Yet*,” Jeongguk repeats, leaning dangerously close.

Jimin doesn’t back away. Instead, he dips his body forward a little more. “Do you intend to do something about it?”

“Will you let me?”

Jimin doesn’t reply. He just stares down at Jeongguk’s lips, waiting.

He doesn’t wait long. Jeongguk surges forward and kisses him, slow and sweet. He inches closer to Jimin with both his arms pushing off the sides of the bathtub, until he backs Jimin into his corner, caging him against his side of the tub.

“Are you still thinking about how handsome Taehyung looks in his uniform, Your Grace?”

He whispers the question against his mouth, ever teasing. Jimin chuckles, a puff of hot breath on the alpha’s lips.

“My thoughts are my own.”

“They’ve always been,” Jeongguk says. “Sometimes it drives me insane. Not knowing what you’re thinking.”

“You can always ask me.”

“You won’t answer,” Jeongguk murmurs, leaning in to nuzzle his cheek. He inhales deeply, filling his lungs with Jimin’s scent. “You’re made out of secrets.”

He starts peppering his jaw with little wet kisses, featherlight but warm.

“Am I?” Jimin breathes out, struggling to keep control. *Not yet.* He’s not yet ready to yield.

Much like the other day at the lake, he wraps a hand around Jeongguk’s cock, and sees every muscle on the alpha’s body contract in sudden pleasure. He hears him moan in his ear, feels him become putty at the contact.

Except his cock grows harder and harder, and Jimin pumps it slowly, savoring how big it feels in his hand. He’s never been with someone quite as well-endowed as Jeongguk is, and the thought of having him inside himself makes him dizzy.

He pushes Jeongguk toward the alpha’s corner of the bathtub.

“Sit up here,” he orders, patting the border of the heavy tub. “Spread your legs.”

It’s weird to say those words aloud—usually it’s alphas who command their omegas to spread their legs for them. But Jeongguk obliges eagerly, sitting up on the edge of the bathtub without complaining.

And spreads his legs for him.

“I should be the one pleasuring you, Your Grace,” Jeongguk says, voice thickening. “Not the other way around.”

Jimin wades toward him, places his hands on Jeongguk’s knees. He looks up at the alpha from behind hooded eyes.

“You don’t want me to?” he teases, sliding his hands up Jeongguk’s inner thighs. He kneels between his legs, still staring up. “I can stop here.”

In response, Jeongguk spreads his legs a little wider to better accommodate him.

Jimin finally levels his gaze to Jeongguk’s cock, standing proud against the alpha’s stomach. He drags his bottom lip inside his mouth, biting it, staring a bit too long at the hard member.

He senses Jeongguk’s anticipation. His scent turns thicker, heady.

“What are you thinking about, Your Grace?” Jeongguk asks him, gravelly. He splays his hands against the tub at his sides and leans back, panting slightly. His cock twitches when Jimin inches even closer.

“Why don’t I show you?”

He gets up on his knees and licks a fat stripe up the underside of Jeongguk’s cock. The alpha grunts, his abdominal muscles tensing up with a wave of sudden pleasure.

Jimin wraps a hand around the shaft to keep it upright, and dips down to lick along the seam of Jeongguk's balls. His alpha scent is pungent there, muskier, wilder—it makes Jimin salivate instantly. He gently sucks them in his mouth, thoroughly coating them in saliva, eliciting small sounds of pleasure from Jeongguk. He's slow and methodical in his ministrations, always glancing up to watch Jeongguk squirm. His other hand is still on Jeongguk's cock, squeezing lightly every time he feels it twitch between his fingers.

Drunk on Jeongguk's alpha scent, Jimin makes his way up the hard shaft with just the tip of his tongue.

Teasing Jeongguk is fun, he muses as he mouths at the throbbing vein running the side of Jeongguk's member. He follows it up, up, pressing the flat of his tongue on the sensitive spot just under the head. Jeongguk jolts and moans loudly, his hands gripping the slick sides of the bathtub until the knuckles turn white.

“Fuck, Ji—ah, Your—*Your Grace*—”

“Were you about to call me by my name?”

Jeongguk would have blushed, but he's already flushed all over. Jimin can't tell if the slip-up flustered him even more.

“I didn't say you could call me Jimin.”

“I apologize,” Jeongguk pants. “Your Grace.”

Jimin smiles devilishly, tapping his lips with the tip of Jeongguk's cock. The alpha's eyes widen, one of his hands slips off the tub, and he fumbles to regain balance. It makes Jimin all the more amused.

“Excited?” he asks Jeongguk, tone innocent.

Jeongguk huffs a breathless chuckle. He stares at Jimin's face, at the head of his cock so close to Jimin's puffy lips, yet not as close as he'd like.

“Not really. I'm not feeling much of anything,” Jeongguk jokes, but his teasing doesn't come out as confidently as usual. His mask crumbles the moment Jimin brings the cockhead to his mouth.

“Your Grace, you don't—you don't have to—”

He slips the swollen head inside his mouth and sucks slowly. Jeongguk groans, tossing his head back to stare at the ceiling.

Jimin swirls his tongue around, careful not to graze him with his teeth. He sees the muscles on Jeongguk's abdomen flex when he presses the flat of his tongue against the slit, and though he won't ever admit it out loud, it's a heavenly sight.

Having only the tip of Jeongguk's cock in his mouth is intoxicating enough—any other time he would have stopped right here, leaving Jeongguk with a mere taste of what he might do to

him if he behaves. Any other time—meaning not today. Today, he feels a little out of control. Today he feels less like a diamond, and more like a creature of flesh and blood and need.

And he indulges in it.

He pulls the tip out to softly blow on it, mentally steeling himself to finish what he started. He hears Jeongguk curse again, glances up to see how he's doing. The alpha is watching him intently, the brown of his irises nearly completely eclipsed by the pupils. He likes what he sees reflected in the black—want. A want so strong he knows Jeongguk could turn the tables on him at any time and decide to take him right then and there, allowing no more teasing, no more dancing around each other—and he *would* let him, against his better judgement.

He knows. But Jeongguk doesn't act on his more feral *instincts*—a creature of intellect after all, Jimin muses, thinking back on the night of Jeongguk's rut as he languidly kisses the sides of Jeongguk's shaft, eyes locked with the alpha's hooded ones.

Jimin doesn't remember having anything quite this big in his mouth before. He had sexual experiences in Northrend, when he was just another omega exploring his sexuality. But there had been no Jeongguk in his father's castle. No scents as pleasant, no eyes as big and sparkling as Jeongguk's.

No cocks as big as his.

He sinks down Jeongguk's cock, pushing the head a little further in his mouth. He hollows his cheeks and sucks, swallowing around the alpha's pulsing shaft. It's like having his mouth completely stuffed with something he knows he can't swallow *down*, and when his gag reflex kicks in, panic gets the better of him for a moment.

He doesn't pull off immediately—he soldiers through, forcing himself to adjust to the feeling, *wanting* to. Jeongguk is completely lost in his pleasure, moaning every time Jimin's tongue presses against him, every time he feels him swallow. Jimin starts bobbing his head up and down, slowly at first, then at a quicker pace. He tastes precum pooling at the back of his mouth, trickling down his throat—it tickles. He swallows again, the walls of his throat tightening around Jeongguk's cock, milking him for more. Jeongguk's ecstasy is contagious, and he soon finds himself sucking and licking the alpha's cock with mindless abandon.

He pops off Jeongguk's throbbing cock to catch his breath. He blows on the tip again, working at the shaft with his hand, pumping him at a steady pace. The alpha's cock has taken on a darker shade—a stark contrast against Jeongguk's fair skin.

He skims the shaft with his teeth, lightly, just to elicit some new reaction out of the alpha—and he does. Jeongguk's hissing sounds delightful. Satisfied, Jimin rewards him by sucking the tip back into his mouth.

He feels Jeongguk rapidly approaching his orgasm when he takes him deeper. Jimin feels his own pool of pleasure start to ignite deep in the pits of his stomach, subtle spikes of electricity traveling throughout his body. With his other hand under the water, he tugs at his own cock, bringing himself closer to his climax.

It doesn't take long for Jeongguk to come. He spills into Jimin's mouth, and Jimin is careful to collect everything the alpha has to give him without spilling a single drop. His come is warm and salty, nothing like the array of earthy smells in the alpha's scent—but he doesn't mind it.

Jimin comes with Jeongguk's cock still in his mouth. His body spasms, but he comes without a sound—something he'd learned to master during his many months in the palace. What he feels as he comes in this bathtub is a thousand times more powerful than anything his husband ever let him feel.

Shaking a little, Jimin gets up on unsteady legs, water sloshing all around him as he rises. He sees Jeongguk's eyes catching on his own spent manhood. The alpha is panting, hard, as though he ran a marathon—mouth hanging open, pupils blown out. Still hungry. Still very much alpha.

Jimin grabs Jeongguk by the sides of his face, tilts his head back, and spits the come in his mouth.

“Swallow.”

The alpha sputters and coughs, eyes going wide in surprise and bewilderment. Jimin covers the alpha's mouth with his palm, unmoved.

But Jeongguk tenses at the command, at the unusual thickness of Jimin's voice. Before going slack, his eyes flash sunset red, flaring with something that isn't quite anger, isn't quite lust.

It's a mix of both. Or maybe something else entirely that Jimin has yet to explore.

He watches as Jeongguk's Adam apple bobs down, then climbs back up. Jimin's hand slides up to comb through Jeongguk's damp hair.

“Thank you for the pleasant conversation,” he says sweetly.

He climbs out of the tub, heading for the doors behind which Ken waits with his robes.

He leaves Jeongguk in the lukewarm water of his bath.

20.

The following days pass by in a blur. Jimin busies himself preparing the palace for the visit of his cousin Seokjin and a small entourage of dignitaries from the Republic—the neighboring coastal country. He doesn't have time to see Jeongguk often, except at dinners, because the Emperor has apparently taken a liking to the alpha. They've been spending entire evenings in the Emperor's apartments, talking about hunting and past conquests and drinking wine together with Taehyung and a few of the Emperor's friends.

Something shifted between them, that much he can feel. Now more than ever, he feels Jeongguk's eyes on him heavy with the weight of things left implicit or simply untold. Jimin knows there's much he doesn't know about the alpha—things he's left behind or things he's trying to leave behind—but he's trained in the virtue of patience, and he knows how to wait, how to bide his time. He's unmasking Jeongguk with every glance, every touch, every kiss he lets the alpha take from him.

He waits until the day Jeongguk comes to him, unraveled, bare, no more secrets webbing the brown of his eyes.

21.

He meets Seokjin in one of the sitting rooms on the first floor of the palace.

“Jimin, no—Your Grace,” Seokjin says, bowing profusely. His big smile borders teasing, but Jimin doesn’t mind. They’ve known each other since they were children playing around his father’s castle.

“Cousin,” Jimin greets him, smiling. “It’s nice to see you. How many years have passed? I see you’ve finally stopped trying to grow a beard.”

“It may suit the citizens of the Republic, but it doesn’t suit me, I’m afraid.” Seokjin laughs loudly, sitting across from Jimin in front of the lit fireplace.

“How’s life in the Republic? You’re always so secretive in your letters. What it is that you do there, again?”

“Ah, my job is boring. Diplomacy and all that stuff, you know. I’m in charge of supervising relations between Northrend and the Republic. Nothing you’d find interesting, I’m sure,” Seokjin says, sipping his tea.

“On the contrary, I’m very interested in diplomacy *and stuff*,” Jimin says, amused. “I’m a sovereign now, don’t you know?”

Seokjin looks at him with fondness. “Oh, I know. You’re doing splendidly, Jimin.” He leans forward, his tone of voice suddenly lower. “I know being the Royal Consort to Emperor Jihan can be... difficult, at times. It’s not the easiest of jobs. But I’ve heard you’re doing amazing, and the people love you.”

“They do?” Jimin snorts, skeptical. He’s never heard of the people of the Empire *loving* him before. “The Court is still a bit on the fence about me. Apparently, I’m not... *human* enough for them.”

Seokjin dismisses his words with a wave of his hand. “I’m not talking about the courtiers, I’m talking about the farmers, the merchants, the small people. Who, by the way, make up eighty percent of the population of your Empire. Most of them are conquered people who once belonged to different nations now erased from the maps, the victims of countless wars. They know what’s it like to suddenly become a citizen of the Empire, obey to new rules, adapt to completely new customs. The nobility looks down on them as they looked down on you the day you first stepped in this palace.” He takes another sip of tea. “I’ve been told of your efforts to change the country for the better. Opening schools in villages, trying to give omegas more rights. Some people may argue that you’re trying to shape the Empire into a copy of Northrend, but I don’t think so. You want to build something new, is that right? Something to call *yours*.”

Jimin’s smile wavers before it comes back brighter than before. He shifts his gaze to the table, a little embarrassed in front of Seokjin’s wide, honest eyes. His cousin has always been

very observant—he likes to think that Seokjin’s perceptiveness rubbed off on him in all those years they spent talking and playing in Northrend.

“The Empire isn’t all bad. I like it here. I want to make it better.”

“And you will,” Seokjin says with conviction. “The Emperor isn’t the easiest person to deal with, but he will fall to your, uh—unusual charms.” He grins at Jimin’s scoffing. “I know you can be very persuasive. Some might say *manipulative*, but—”

“I learned from the best,” Jimin says, shrugging.

“You were the best option for this role,” Seokjin continues, his expression darkening. “You know that, right? Your father didn’t send you here as a punishment. He loves you dearly. His heart broke when he had to let you go.”

“I know,” Jimin mutters, feeling a strange emptiness where his heart should be.

“No one of your younger siblings would have survived here. They’re sweet, *too* sweet.”

“And I’m—what? Sour?”

“You’re sweet, too. Not like them, no—but in a completely different way. And unlike them, you know how to use that sweetness to your advantage.”

Jimin hides a bitter smile. “You have a very high opinion of me, cousin. I’m not sure you should.”

The doors to the sitting room open with a creak. Jimin observes the flames in the fireplace sway with an invisible breeze as he smells Ken’s familiar scent wafting closer, paired with the servant’s soft, quick footsteps. He feels him bend down to whisper in his ear, discreet as always.

“Your Grace, Jeongguk asks if you’d like to have the horses arranged for a ride in the woods this afternoon, after you’re done with your meetings for the day.”

Jimin shoots a glance toward the doors. He glimpses Jeongguk leaning against one of the pillars in the hallway, watching him from a respectful distance, and waves him over. The alpha smiles faintly and walks to the doors, stopping at the threshold.

“Hello, Jeongguk. Why don’t you ask the Emperor? I’ve heard you two have become great friends.”

He makes sure to add an extra dose of sugar in the words, just like Seokjin said he’s so good at doing.

“Ah. Yes. Of course, Your Grace. As it pleases you.”

The alpha dips into an elegant—if a little stiffer than usual—bow before glancing up at him a last time, vaguely taken aback by the bite in Jimin’s words. His eyes flit to Seokjin for a moment before he walks away without insisting.

Jimin knows Jeongguk is disappointed, but he's not seen Seokjin in ages, and he wants to spend some time alone with his cousin before parading him in front of the entire Court.

Jeongguk can come see him when he decides to tell him the truth about who he really is.

He turns back to Seokjin, pleased. "Were you saying?"

A pallor has taken to Seokjin's face. His eyes have widened and his mouth hangs slightly open, and he stares at the empty space previously occupied by Jeongguk without uttering a single word.

"Jin?"

"Who—Jimin, who was that?"

"He's my—well, he's my official lover in the Court. It's a long story; the Emperor appointed him."

Seokjin blanches. "He's *what*?"

"I know, it sounds ridiculous. Another of the Empire's silly customs, apparently—"

"No, Jimin, you don't understand." Seokjin leans forward, glancing at the doors as though he could make sure nobody was listening in on them by merely staring at the solid wood. "I *know* him. I've *seen* him before—I don't think he recognized me, but *I* did."

Jimin frowns. A thrill of excitement ripples through him, but he subdues it quickly. Maybe the mystery of Jeongguk's identity won't remain a mystery for much longer, after all.

"That... is entirely possible. Where did you see him?"

But Seokjin looks agitated. He rubs his brows, thinking quickly. "What did you say he is, now?"

"My *lover*," Jimin huffs, growing impatient. "He's just playing the part. I *know* he isn't who he says he is, I'm not stupid. My guess is that he's some kind of lesser noble from an obscure house at the edge of the Empire, or maybe a soldier running away from the law—"

Seokjin guffaws, but it's a brittle laughter that drowns Jimin's words in pure bitterness. "Oh, he's no noble, Jimin. Nor is he a simple foot soldier." He shakes his head, a stern expression overcoming his features. "I have worked with him before. In the Republic. There's other people like him, many more. Jimin, have you ever heard—do you know of an organization called Animadverto?"

"Animadverto?"

The word sounds alien in his mouth, and it doesn't roll easily off his tongue. It's jagged, full of sharp edges. Foreign.

"Is that Republican?" Jimin asks, curious.

“Old Republican. Very old,” Seokjin says, serious as he’s never seen him before. “It means—it has many meanings. To observe closely, to perceive—pay close attention, basically. More literally, it means *turning your spirit towards* something to better come to know it. But it can also mean *to judge*. And *to punish*.”

Jimin stares at Seokjin, long and hard. His eyes narrow down to slits.

“What are you trying to say? What *is* Animadverto?”

Seokjin sighs. “Spies. They’re spies, Jimin. It’s a not-so-secret organization of spies and, on occasion, assassins. It’s old and very, *very* powerful. They’re based in the Republic, in the capital—I think, I’ve never been to their headquarters, they keep it a secret. But I, er, I’ve worked with them sometimes. For my job. They buy and sell information, keep a sort of balance among the most powerful nations. It’s a sort of neutral organization, or so they want you to think. *I* think they’re a bit Republic-oriented. Not surprising, really. But their network of spies stretches as far as Northrend.”

Jimin listens to Seokjin speak without really *hearing* the words. The sound of his cousin’s voice started to muffle after Seokjin said the word *assassin*. Some part of his brain is still registering the information—based in the Republic’s capital, secretive, neutral organization, spies, assassins, assassins, assassins, *assassins*—the rest is just a ringing in his ears. Faint at first, but growing in intensity with each passing second. Loud, and obsessive, and piercing Jimin’s brain like Seokjin’s words were a hundred red-hot needles plunged into his skull.

Spies.

Assassins.

Spy.

Assassin.

He hears Seokjin’s words as if from very, very far away.

“—he’s a spy, Jimin. A dangerous one. He even killed for me once—well, for the Republic, but their interests happened to match Northrend’s on that day. I never saw him again, but I’d recognize his face and scent anywhere. He’s Animadverto.”

Jimin’s fingernails dig into his palm until they draw blood.

22.

He paces the length of his bedchamber as his heart slams painfully against his ribcage, trapped behind skin and muscle and bone. He wants to rip his heart out to make the rabbiting stop—no, he wants to rip *someone else's* heart out. Feel it beat its last painful beats in his hand, then throw it into the fire, watch it burn to ashes and dust. He wishes Seokjin hadn't visited him. He wishes Seokjin had visited him a month ago.

The doors of his room open, and in walks Jeongguk, alone as Jimin ordered. He'd sent Ken to fetch the alpha for him, ordering the servant to wait outside his apartments and give them privacy.

He wants to be alone.

With the *spy*.

"Your Grace, you called on me?"

He can't bear it—the glittering eyes, the smile already tugging at his lips. Seokjin's words explode in his mind. *He killed for me—well, for the Republic*. Red blooms at the edge of his vision.

"You *liar!*"

It's stronger than him, this urge poisoning him from the inside out—Jimin grabs the ornamental dagger kept on display on his dresser and lunges at Jeongguk, enraged.

"Your Gr—"

He sees Jeongguk's eyes widen imperceptibly before the alpha skids to the side, barely in time to avoid Jimin's surprise attack. He backs all the way against the window, on the opposite side of the chamber.

"*What are you doing?*"

"I know what you are," Jimin hisses, pushing strands of silver hair from his eyes. The hand holding the dagger trembles with rage. He's livid. He's mad. He's *sad*. "Seokjin told me. He saw you. You *worked* with him, you son of a *whore*."

"I—I don't—"

Jeongguk side steps another one of Jimin's attacks, quickly coming to stand near the wall opposite the window again. He's still wearing his mask, still playing the part, still pretending to look shocked.

"*Stop lying. You're a spy, an assassin, Animadverto.*"

Jeongguk's expression falls the moment Jimin utters the foreign word. His features smoothen out, and his eyes suddenly take on a much harder edge. The curtains to their silly play close to a very different Jeon Jeongguk.

He's never seen him so cold—so *distant*. He doesn't know *this* Jeongguk.

“That's a word I never thought I'd hear from you, Your Grace.”

Jimin growsl. “I'm full of surprises.”

“That, you are.” Jeongguk laughs, but it's a different kind of laugh, not the pleasant one Jeongguk always used with him and the Court. This one's sharp and raucous, lower in the throat.

“I learned it very soon.”

“Were you sent to spy on me?” Jimin spits out, angry. To his dismay, he can't control his voice—like Jeongguk dropping off his mask, *he* is also showing the alpha a part of him that rarely comes out of hiding. His anger, and his hurt.

“Are you acting on the Republic's orders? Are they angry the Emperor chose a Consort from the North, instead of one from the coast?”

Another one of Jeongguk's brittle laughs.

“Is that what you think, Jimin? That the Republic doesn't *like* you?”

Hearing Jeongguk say his given name so casually, like it costs him nothing, enrages him. It should *not* have happened this way. Jeongguk should *not* have spoken his name *like this*.

He surges forward again, aiming at the alpha's neck. Jeongguk grabs him by the wrists and slams him against the wall, before retreating again in the shadows of a corner.

In his fury, Jimin didn't even realize the sun had set. Now it's but a line of shimmering gold in the horizon, quietly singeing the forest beyond the royal gardens. They say there are no shadows in the Court of Suns, but there is one standing right in front of him, darker than midnight.

“You've lost your cool, Jimin. Never met a spy before? Your father didn't have any, back in Northrend?”

“You're an assassin, a *murderer*. You were sent to spy on me, kill me? Is that it? Were you going to kill me, Jeongguk?” He's panting, shaking. He feels betrayed. His heart lies broken in tiny little pieces, each hard and sharp like the shards of a shattered diamond.

“Is that even your real name? Would you have told me who you were before slitting my throat?”

Jeongguk shakes his head. “You already knew I wasn't who I claimed to be.”

“I thought you were a—a—*I don’t know*, a disgraced noble, a soldier, anyone but a fucking spy!” Jimin shouts, furious. “I thought you were hiding from something or someone, I thought you were seeking refuge in the Court! Building a new life, turning on a new leaf, taking advantage of the Emperor’s stupid job opening, anything—*anything but this!*”

He growls, a disarticulated sound ripping from his throat, leaving him breathless, raw. Frustrated, because for all he’d observed, for all he’d *noticed* about Jeongguk, he didn’t notice *this*.

“I can’t believe I let you so close. I can’t believe I *trusted* you.”

“You didn’t,” Jeongguk says slowly. “You never did. Not yet.”

Jimin’s shaking ends as suddenly as it started. He walks to the desk, where the remains of a lonely dinner lie forgotten. He throws a knife to Jeongguk, who catches it by the handle with impeccable reflexes.

Of course. He’s a skilled assassin, after all.

His anger boils.

“This ends here,” Jimin snarls. “You’re trained with the sword. You’re an assassin and a spy, so I expect you know how to wield knives. If you don’t kill me tonight, I’ll kill *you*.”

“For someone as smart as you are, Jimin, you’re really quick to jump to the wrong conclusions.”

“Fight me. Not as your *older brother*, who *fought in the war*, taught you,” Jimin growls at him, mocking. “Fight me like the trained assassin you are.”

He lunges at the alpha’s side. Wielding the dagger, his reach is slightly longer than Jeongguk’s, whose weapon is a mere kitchen knife. But Jeongguk simply dodges again, avoiding each of his attacks with maddening ease—like he did in the barracks.

“Don’t you dare dance around me,” Jimin warns him, threatening.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Jimin.”

“Too bad, cause *I do*.”

Jeongguk ducks and steps back, avoiding another attack aimed at his head. “You don’t.”

“Who the hell are you to know what I *want* or *don’t want*?” Jimin yells, growing frustrated. Jeongguk is slippery, the way he dodges his attacks feels like a mockery. He knows he’s rusted, that he hasn’t trained with a weapon in months, that his clothes get in the way. He knows he can’t win against the alpha—but the thought that Jeongguk made him believe that he could *infuriates* him.

“I’m the spy who was sent to gather information about you, remember?”

“You’re the *assassin* who was sent after me,” Jimin says. “Why else would you get close to me?”

Jeongguk blocks his next attack with the blade of his knife, quick as lightning. He grabs Jimin’s wrist and holds it up and away. “*Think*, Jimin. Who’s the most hated sovereign in the continent?”

Jimin roars, struggling to get free. Jeongguk grabs his other wrist.

“You want to kill us *all*?!”

“And then who would reign over the Empire?” Jeongguk huffs, impatient. “No. This country needs a ruler. Needs stability, needs time to grow. A compassionate ruler, not a tyrant.”

Jimin finally wrenches free. He takes a step back, massaging his wrist. The skin has acquired a reddish tinge—it’s going to bruise in the morning. “You won’t find him here.”

Jeongguk cocks his head to the side. “No? Are you sure, Your Grace?”

“You’re from the Republic,” Jimin spits, venom in his words. “An assassin from the Republic. Why should you care about the fate of this wretched Empire?”

“Such a big nation has influence over every other nation in the continent, Jimin. I don’t need to explain politics to you—you’re far more versed in them than I. And I *am* from the Empire,” Jeongguk says bitterly, lowering his knife. “I was born here. I *did* fight one of the Emperor’s wars. A useless one, like all the others, against the Republic itself.”

Jeongguk snorts, twirling the knife in the air like it’s nothing but a toy for him. “My commander was a close friend of your dear husband, the Emperor. I deserted when he gave the order to burn a town of farmers to the ground. I wasn’t fighting for that. What good would burning innocent people bring to my country? I decided right then and there that I didn’t want to have any part in the Emperor’s wars.” He smiles as though remembering a fond memory. “He was my first kill in the shadows. I slit my commander’s throat and then crossed to the other side. Animadverto found me a few months later.”

“You’re a deserter *and* a traitor of your country,” Jimin says, uncertain.

Jeongguk’s gaze sharpens. “No. I’m here to choose a better future for my country. And it starts with you.”

“You’re lying again,” Jimin says, shaking his head. “I don’t believe you.”

“I was merely surveying the situation. But I think I reached my conclusion now.” Jeongguk smiles at him, the picture of poise and affability. Like Jimin isn’t standing in front of him with a dagger aimed at his heart.

He doesn’t believe him. He can’t. Jeongguk is charming, and he *has* charmed him, and he’s a spy and a liar—and a killer. He’ll be killed the second he lowers his guard. He briefly wonders when Jeongguk planned to murder him—after finally sleeping with him, perhaps?

To be the one to break through every single one of the Royal Consort's defenses, it certainly would have made for a beautiful victory. And after that, the Emperor's turn.

"Your words are empty, because they're the words of a liar," Jimin hisses to Jeongguk's face.

This time he's a bit faster than Jeongguk, much to his surprise. He manages to slip behind his guard, and his dagger would have hit true if Jeongguk's instincts hadn't kicked in, and he hadn't counterattacked with the knife.

His dagger is sent flying toward a corner of the room, and Jimin feels a sudden burn on his right cheek, just under the eye. He gasps, head whipping to the side as a curtain of silver hair falls on his eyes.

He hears Jeongguk inhale sharply, hears the clatter of the knife against the marble floor. The tip of the blade is red.

Jimin brings a hand to his cheek. His heart pulses through the cut. It doesn't hurt, and it feels superficial—but when the pads of his fingers come back stained in red, he freezes. It's been a while since anyone made him bleed.

"Jimin."

More of an exhalation than a word. His name. His given name, the way Jimin imagined Jeongguk would say it one day—softly, with reverence. Except it's laced with anxiety.

Jeongguk enters his field of vision, worry etched deep in the alpha's handsome features. He cups Jimin's face, his thumb swiping tenderly over the cut.

What he hears in Jeongguk's voice, though, completely breaks him.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I never wanted to—I didn't mean to hurt you, you were too quick and I didn't *think* fast enough—"

Jimin shoves Jeongguk away. Jeongguk stumbles back, surprised, hurt. Jimin takes a step forward, shoves him again—harder, this time. Jeongguk's back hits the wall.

"You cut me."

"I did," Jeongguk whispers, crestfallen. "I didn't mean to."

"You could have hit my eye," Jimin whispers back.

"I know. You think I don't know? For a second, I thought I had. I thought I'd seriously hurt you."

Jimin steps right into Jeongguk's space, breathing the air the alpha is breathing.

"You don't want to kill me," he says, more to himself than to Jeongguk.

The alpha shakes his head. His eyes have saddened again. "I would *never*."

All the anger, all the fury Jimin felt up to this moment turn impossibly warmer.

“Good.”

He grabs Jeongguk’s chin in the same bruising hold Jeongguk gripped his wrist earlier and traps the alpha’s mouth in his, kissing Jeongguk as fiercely as he’d never allowed himself to do before. Jeongguk answers after a beat, reciprocating with the same kind of reckless intensity.

Their scents surge at the same time. Jimin moans into the kiss, pine needles and resin and rain fogging his senses in the most delicious of ways. But instead of slowing him down, the smell spurs him on, makes him bolder.

He drags Jeongguk to the bed, where he pushes him down on the mattress. Jeongguk makes space for him, but Jimin just climbs over his lap and straddles him. It’s hard to do with his robes—so he just tears through the fabric, ripping along his legs.

Jeongguk helps him out of his robes at the same time Jimin rips Jeongguk’s shirt off him. Their movements are quick, frenetic, excited. Jeongguk helps him tear the rest of his clothes off his body and throws them to the side along with his torn shirt—turns out there’s a very quick and efficient way of undressing from these ridiculous robes, and Jimin has never felt more grateful for Jeongguk’s strength than right now.

With Jimin naked over him, Jeongguk holds his breath, stunned to silence. His hands shoot up to grab Jimin’s sides, but Jimin swats them away.

“You can look,” Jimin starts, breathless, “But you can’t touch. Isn’t it what you do for a living—watch? *Observe?*”

Jimin grabs Jeongguk’s wrists and pushes them against the pillow next to the alpha’s face, just below the elaborate wooden bedpost. “*Animadverto,*” Jimin whispers, the tip of his nose brushing Jeongguk’s.

Jeongguk bucks his hips into him, an unconscious reaction to Jimin’s rubbing against him. He hears the alpha moan, but he doesn’t try to touch him. His hands stay where they are.

Jimin shoots him a small smile. The cut on his cheek burns a little as he does, but he doesn’t mind—right now, he thinks he likes how it feels.

He swipes the back of a hand over his cheek, wiping away a little of the blood. The cut is already starting to scar over.

“You can’t blame me if I don’t trust you entirely, can you?”

Jimin tears a strip of cloth from the silk sheets. Jeongguk watches him with ever darkening eyes as Jimin ties him to the bedpost—first one wrist, then the other, shredding the expensive bedsheets.

“What are you doing?” Jeongguk growls, but he’s not angry. Jimin can see it in his eyes. The alpha tests the knots. They don’t give. “This is unnecessary.”

“I decide what is or isn’t necessary.”

Jimin wraps his fingers around Jeongguk’s bigger hands. They’re balled into fists, like he’s trying to control himself. “*These* aren’t necessary,” Jimin whispers, his breath ghosting over Jeongguk’s lips. Then, one of his hands dips down to grab Jeongguk’s cock. “*This* is necessary.”

A sound that is halfway between a chuckle and a growl tumbles out Jeongguk’s lips. His eyes flash sunset red before plunging back to midnight. “I’m very skilled with my hands.”

“Oh, I believe you.” Jimin smiles, slowly starting to pump Jeongguk’s cock. “But it’s not your hands I’m interested in, tonight.”

“You were trying to kill me five minutes ago.”

“I would have.” Jimin curls his fingers around the head of Jeongguk’s cock, palm pressing against the slit. “Turns out I don’t need to.” He lets Jeongguk shallowly fuck into his hand. Precome spreads messily against his palm, sticky and warm. “Turns out you’re mine, after all.”

“Yes,” Jeongguk moans, eyes fluttering closed. “Yours.”

The blood he’s felt simmering during the last few weeks whenever his eyes fell on Jeongguk is now *boiling*. Heat unfurls deep in Jimin’s body, his veins are an intricate web of fire underneath the skin. He doesn’t want to *wait* anymore.

He’s been leaking slick over the sheets and Jeongguk’s thighs, he can smell the sweet scent of it mixed with the usual scent of peaches. He stands on his knees and starts to finger himself in time with his strokes on Jeongguk’s cock.

Seeing what Jimin is doing, Jeongguk tries once again to break free from his restraints. He’s stopped by a squeeze at the base of his cock, and he groans, pain mixing with pleasure.

“Try again and I will leave you tied here while I go fuck someone else.”

Jeongguk smirks, old arrogance seeping back into his features. “You don’t *want* to fuck someone else.”

“Then I’ll make you watch as I come on my fingers, and you will be left wondering what’s it like to be inside me,” Jimin says, saccharine sweet. He’s opening himself up hard and fast, eager to sit on Jeongguk’s cock for the first time. He’s been wanting to for *days*, he’s been *dying* to—he was going to wait for all the cards to be revealed before giving in, and now here they are, every single one of those cards laid in front of him, clear as day.

His spy, his assassin. His lover.

He slips out his fingers with a wet squelch. He’s leaking so much, he doesn’t think he’s ever produced this much slick before in his life—the scent alone must be driving Jeongguk insane. In a sudden burst of mercy, he pushes two wet fingers in the alpha’s mouth to let him taste him.

Jeongguk licks away every drop of slick, sucking his fingers clean eagerly. He writhes under his weight, impatient, hips starting to buck up again. Jimin watches him squirm a bit longer before finally aligning the alpha's cock with his entrance.

"Fuck," Jeongguk moans, looking down. "Fuck, Jimin. Fuck, fuck—*fuck*."

Jimin pauses, lets his slick slowly drip on Jeongguk's hard member. Jeongguk watches it trickle down his shaft, mix with the precome oozing out of the tip. Their scents blend together. Jeongguk's cock throbs insistently in his hand, heavy, turgid, wet.

Jimin just stares at the alpha's face, immobile over him, until Jeongguk bursts into a vaguely hysterical laughter, tossing his head back against the pillows. "I can't look," he pants, sounding fucked out of his mind. "I can't fucking look anymore or I'll go crazy."

"Maybe it's what I want," Jimin purrs, and lets the head slip past his rim.

He immediately tenses around it. He closes his eyes, forcing himself to relax and soften his muscles. To see Jeongguk's cock, to have it in his hands, in his mouth—are all very different things compared to trying to shove it up his ass. He knows that if he doesn't do it slowly, he'll just end up hurting himself.

It's an almost torturous descent, both for Jeongguk and Jimin. Jeongguk glances down every now and then, moaning, murmuring unintelligible things, straining against the fabric that keeps his wrists tied to the bed. His legs tense at Jimin's sides, muscles bulging out, feet planted firmly against the mattress. Every single one of the alpha's muscles is taut in anticipation and the effort to stay still.

Jimin goes slow because he needs to, and because he wants to. He wants to savor every single feeling—the stretch, the burn, the pain when he dares give in to a little of his impatience. The pleasure. He finally sinks down to Jeongguk's balls and sits there, the full length of Jeongguk's cock buried in his ass a pulsating, hard presence against his walls.

He doesn't have words to describe it. He feels full like never before, like no other alpha ever made him feel before—either in Northrend or in the palace. It feels overwhelmingly sweet.

And after a minute of adjusting to the foreign sensation, all he feels is the desire to move, roll his hips, *come*. It's nearly unbearable.

"Don't move."

He doesn't care to start slow. He's gotten accustomed to Jeongguk's girth, so he gives in to the pleasure. He starts riding Jeongguk's cock with abandon, taking everything from the alpha. He balances part of his weight first on Jeongguk's chest, then on the bedpost to quicken his pace, lost in a cloud of dense pleasure. All he hears is his own fast breathing, the smacking of flesh against flesh—wet, loud, obscene—and Jeongguk moaning under him, loudly, muscles tensing with the effort not to fuck back into Jimin.

Jeongguk lets himself be used, staring up in awe at Jimin giving in to his wildest instincts. The alpha's face is scrunched up with need, want, pleasure, more, more, *too much—less*.

“Jimin, *fuck*—” he grunts when Jimin clenches around his cock, “—slow down. God, *please* slow down.”

“Oh, you want me to slow down?” Jimin sighs, his heavy breathing blowing strands of silvery hair from his face. “Like this?”

He rolls his hips languidly, letting Jeongguk savor the feel of his entire length buried deep in him.

“*Yes, god, yes.*”

Jimin smiles and continues, feeling—*watching* Jeongguk falling deeper into a state of hazy pleasure. He starts fucking himself on Jeongguk’s cock again, much slower this time, unhurriedly, like they have all the time in the world. His hips move in ways they haven’t moved in months, years even—he can’t remember the last time he found a lover he enjoyed as much as he’s enjoying Jeongguk. But his body remembers the motions, remembers how to sharpen the scent of an alpha into its deepest, wildest notes.

“You like this?” Jimin asks, a little breathless. His movements get slower and slower, and Jeongguk squirms beneath him. He clenches around the alpha again, slows down, clenches again, slows down some more. Then his hips come to a complete halt with the alpha still fully buried inside him.

“What?” Jeongguk pants—whines. “Why’d you stop?”

Jimin just smiles, sitting prettily on the alpha’s cock—ignoring the sweat getting in his eyes.

Jeongguk digs his feet into the mattress, impatient.

“Move, and I’ll use the sheets to choke you this time.”

The threat has a completely opposite effect to what Jimin expected. Jeongguk growls and the muscles of his arms bulge out as he tries to wrench free—almost desperately, feral in a way he’s never seen the alpha before. He *does* move. His hips buck up into Jimin’s, bouncing him on his lap.

Jimin gasps, almost falling over the alpha. He catches himself with a hand on the bedpost as Jeongguk starts to slam up against him with a brutal pace, faster than the rhythm Jimin started with. A staccato of moans falls from Jimin’s lips, and he doesn’t care to swallow them back. He lets them out with euphoric abandon, letting Jeongguk fuck him into a daze.

Eventually, the knots tying Jeongguk’s hands on the bedpost come undone. He realizes only when he feels Jeongguk’s hands grab him at the waist, strong and almost bruising—and then the alpha flips them over, caging Jimin against the mattress in what is definitely a more dominant position.

“Did you have fun with me, Your Grace?” Jeongguk growls in his ear, feral. Jimin shivers, his arms automatically wrapping around the alpha’s neck to bring him closer. “Now it’s my turn.”

Jimin feels the cockhead prod at his rim before Jeongguk pushes in all at once, burying himself inside Jimin to the very hilt. They groan in unison, hugging each other closer. The air in the room is pregnant with the smell of sweat and pine and peaches, *their* smell.

Jimin loves it.

Every time Jeongguk thrusts into him Jimin slides closer to the bedpost, to the point he has to keep his hands planted against it to avoid hitting his head. He lets Jeongguk have his way with him, feeling himself climb the high of his pleasure, pushing off the bedpost to match the rhythm of his hips to Jeongguk's and moaning louder each time he feels the tip of the alpha's cock rub against his prostate—mercilessly, generously, everything at once.

They come at the same time, Jimin on both their stomachs, Jeongguk deep inside him. He keeps fucking in and out as warm come dribbles out of Jimin, the squelching of both slick and cum as Jeongguk refuses to slow down filling the room as their moans subside.

That's when he feels Jeongguk's knot swell inside him, pushing insistently at his rim. Jeongguk shoves it all in, locking Jimin in place under his weight. Jimin howls, sharp pain mixing deliciously with the residual pleasure of his climax.

"Fuck."

Jeongguk falls on top of him, spent. Jimin throws an arm over him, trying to pull him even closer.

"Your knot should be declared illegal. It's tearing my ass apart."

The last thing he hears before he gives in into exhaustion is the sound of Jeongguk's breathless laughter.

23.

He wakes up when it's still night. He glances at the window, at the moon high in the sky. He rolls over to the other side. Jeongguk isn't lying next to him.

He sits up, confused. *He must've gone to get a glass of water*, he thinks, pawing at his eyes. He puts a hand on the sheets where Jeongguk slept. They're cold.

He gets up, slipping on his night robe. Tying it at the waist, he pads to the window. He opens it to let fresh air waft inside, cleaning the bedroom of the scent of pine needles and peaches. Jeongguk's scent is barely there.

There is no one outside, not even a guard.

Then he hears it—footsteps, doors slamming open, doors slamming shut, distant shouts. The palace shakes awake.

He waits for the knock at his door, dread mounting rapidly in his chest. He doesn't turn when Yoongi and the guards barge inside, unannounced.

"Jimin, are you—oh thank God, *you're safe*."

Yoongi takes his hands in his, squeezes them. His face is a mask of worry. "Are you okay? Did someone try to enter your chambers?"

"No," Jimin says, calm. His heart rabbits away in its cage of flesh and bone.

Yoongi freezes. "What's this on your face?"

Jimin's hand flies to the cut. "Thorns. The rose bushes in the garden."

Yoongi's expression relaxes before darkening again.

"The Emperor is dead," he says. "He lies dead in his bed. Murdered. A single dagger in his heart."

Jimin exhales a shaky breath. He counts to five, then asks, "Have you caught them?"

"Not yet," Yoongi says, anxious. "They're still roaming the palace. It's what Taehyung thinks, at least."

Taehyung. The leader of the Emperor's personal guard. "Did Taehyung see them? The murderer?"

"No. We don't know who did it. Taehyung suspects someone from the high nobility, someone the Emperor has slighted in some way."

Jimin almost smiles. "That's a long list of suspects."

“We don’t know if the assassin has targeted you, as well. We can’t be sure,” Yoongi continues. “We’re placing double the guards outside your apartments, and in all your rooms. You’ll have a few stationed in the receiving room as you sleep. You should be safe in here, but you *have* to stay in this room, am I clear?”

Jimin nods. He feels strange, so strange, like in a dream. Did what happened with Jeongguk really happen? He can’t smell his scent in the air, not anymore. His sheets are cold. Was it a dream after all?

But the Emperor is dead. Murdered. A dagger in his heart, the hatred of a whole nation.

“—you have to be kept safe at *all* costs, because you know what happens now, right, Jimin?”

He blinks and looks at Yoongi, focusing his gaze again. No time to daydream. Jimin swallows.

“... Yes.”

Yoongi stares deep into his eyes, as if to find something there. Then he nods.

“I’m going to search the royal wing, make sure nobody is sneaking around. Send a guard after me if you need anything.” He hesitates before heading out into the palace again. “Or do you want me to stay here? Keep you safe?”

“I know how to keep myself safe.”

“Of course,” Yoongi says, smiling imperceptibly. “And you’re never afraid.”

Jimin feels his heart tremble.

“Only sometimes.”

He stares at the closed doors when the guards and Yoongi walk outside. He stands there, in his thin night robe, listening to the silence absorbing his thoughts away. He can’t think of anything. He can’t let himself think of death.

Or of who roams the palace’s dark hallways, alone.

He hears a faint knocking against glass, and he startles. He whirls around toward the window. Jeongguk is perched on the windowsill, a hand against the glass of the open window.

“Why tonight?” Jimin asks, rushing up to the assassin with quick, soft steps. It’s a cold night. Wind from the North sweeps the gardens, bending the top of the trees, turning the grass around the palace into a dark, fluttering ocean. Jeongguk’s hood falls back, revealing disheveled hair.

“Why *not* tonight,” Jeongguk says back, grinning. His smile turns a little sad. “An assassin never sticks around after the deed is done.”

“They won’t find out it was you.”

“They will. Seokjin is here. He’ll tell them.”

“I’ll order him not to.”

Jeongguk tilts his head to the side, eyes glinting in the night. “That’s right. You can do that now, can’t you?”

Jimin exhales. “He’ll listen to me. Everyone will. I’ll think of something. They suspect someone important in the Court.”

“Mmh, Court intrigue. Cliché, but always fun.” Jeongguk chuckles. “It won’t work. They’ll sniff me out eventually.”

“What are you doing?” Jimin asks, stricken. “What are you *trying* to do?”

Jeongguk takes Jimin’s hand, brings it up to his face. His lips never brush Jimin’s knuckles. “Just trying to survive.”

“I’ll protect you.”

“Protecting a killer won’t impress the Court,” Jeongguk says, sad.

“I don’t care. I’ll do what I want.”

“You can’t. You’re better than that. You won’t.” Jeongguk finally kisses his hand, very gently, like he’s a knight paying his respects to the omega he’s courting. “I chose you for this reason.”

Jeongguk whispers a single word under his breath before kissing Jimin one last time, a brush of lips against lips, and finally falling back into the night, quick as the lightning Jimin sees flashing in the distance.

“Emperor.”

End Notes

△△ !!!! Remember that I CAN read the comments you leave on your BOOKMARKED FICS if your bookmarks aren't set on private. This means I can read the rating you've assigned to my fic (or any fic), the things you liked or disliked about it, and all the other criticism that maybe you wouldn't want the author to know. Sometimes fic writers will check the bookmarks because some readers are too shy to leave comments and they leave nice notes there instead. But other times, we happen to read rather unpleasant things on a fic that has been offered in good faith *for free, & written in our own spare time*.

Please, if you mean to rate this fic or give your unsolicited criticism, *put. your. bookmarks. on. private.*

Thank you. !!!! △△

thanks for reading! dont forget to uhhh like comment and subscribe, as the kids say

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!